

Young Voters and the 2004 Election

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Voter turnout increased sharply in 2004, reaching its highest level since the 1968 presidential election. Young adults contributed to the surge. Although news reports initially claimed that young adults had failed once again to show up at the polls, the reports proved wrong. Nearly five million more young adults voted in 2004 than had done so in 2000.

This report summarizes the Vanishing Voter Project's findings about the participation of young adults in the 2004 presidential election. Beginning in late February and ending in early November, we conducted seven national surveys. Compared with the project's ninety-nine national surveys during the 2000 campaign and its suspenseful aftermath, the 2004 study was decidedly modest in scope. Our purpose was simply to discover how participation rates, particularly those of young adults, compared with those of the 2000 campaign.

Promising Signs amidst Disappointing Primary Voting Rates

Turnout in the Iowa caucuses suggested that 2004 was going to be a different kind of election than the one four years earlier. More than 120,000 Iowa Democrats participated, twice the level of 2000. Among young adults, participation was four times higher than it was in 2000.¹ Turnout in New Hampshire's Democratic primary also rose sharply—60,000 more ballots were cast than in 2000. Unlike Iowa, however, the turnout increase among young adults was almost identical to that of older adults. Turnout in South Carolina's Democratic primary was a record high.

Primary turnout thereafter took a tumble. Turnout in the uncontested Republican primaries was the lowest ever, eclipsing previous lows set in the uncontested 1984 and 1972 Republican races. On the Democratic side, the overall turnout rate was the third lowest on record, barely edging the Gore-Bradley 2000 race and the uncontested 1996 race. Low turnout in the 2004 Democratic race was attributable in part to the sharp drop in turnout after John Kerry effectively secured the nomination with a set of victories in early March. However, the 2004 race was not unique in this respect. Turnout had also fallen precipitously in 1996 and 2000 after early March's Super Tuesday encounters.

¹ The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, "Young Voter Turnout Quadrupled in Iowa Caucuses," press release, January 20, 2004.

Moreover, low turnout in 2004 was not confined to states with later primaries. New York and Connecticut had record low turnouts even though their primaries were held when the Democratic nomination was still an open race.² As for young adults, their turnout in the 2004 Democratic primaries was no higher than it had been in 2000.³

Nevertheless, voter involvement was in other ways substantially higher during the 2004 nominating period than it had been in 2000. Young adults in particular were paying

much closer attention. In our national survey in late February, nearly half of 18-30 year old adults said they had read, seen, or heard an election news story within the past day. Only slightly more than a third had made this claim in our survey during the comparable week of the 2000 campaign. Young adults in 2004 were also more likely (39 percent versus 29 percent) to say they had talked about the campaign within the past day, as well as more likely (43 percent to 26 percent) to say they had spent time in the past day thinking about the campaign.

	Age 18-29		Age 30+	
	2000	2004	2000	2004
News	36%	49%	48%	51%
Talk	29%	39%	30%	31%
Think	26%	43%	50%	54%

Young adults believed that the outcome of the 2004 election would substantially affect the country's future. In our February survey, nearly three in five felt that the election of one party rather than the other would have "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of impact on the nation. In 2000, only a third of them had believed that the election offered a critical choice. In fact, young adults in 2004 were more likely than older ones (57 percent versus 51 percent) to claim that the choice was a decisive one.

Interest Was Relatively High Throughout the Campaign

In 2000, Americans' interest in the campaign plummeted once the nominating races had been decided. Not until the first of the summer conventions four months later was interest rekindled.

In 2004, interest dipped after Kerry secured his party's nomination but not precipitously so. In our mid-April survey, 42 percent of young adults said they were paying "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of attention to the campaign. During the same period in 2000, three times fewer—a mere 13 percent—said they were paying close attention. Compared with 2000, young adults in 2004 were nearly twice as likely (36 percent versus 20 percent) to say they had read, seen, or heard an election news story within the past day; three times more likely (42 percent versus 14 percent) to say they had

² Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, "States of Electorate and Election Diverge: Record Low Primary Turnout: High November Turnout Likely," report, September 29, 2004.

³ The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, "Youth Share of Voters Remains Constant in 2004 Contests," press release, March 3, 2004.

talked about the campaign within the past day; and more than twice as likely (54 percent to 20 percent) to say they had spent time in the past day thinking about the campaign.

Presidential campaigns are marathon events that can test the interest of even the most dedicated citizens, much less the interest of traditionally hard-to-reach young adults. In 2004, however, their interest stayed relatively high throughout the campaign, buoyed in part by outside developments, such as the 9/11 Commission hearings. Our mid-July survey found, for example, that 53 percent of young adults claimed to have thought about the campaign within the past day. In 2000, this level was not reached until the closing week of the campaign—the point at which election interest normally peaks. In our September 2004 survey, fully half of young adults said they had discussed the election within the past twenty-four hours, a level also not reached in 2000 until the campaign's final week.

Iraq Sparked Young Adults' Interest

Our September survey included a question that confirmed what election insiders had been saying: the Iraq conflict was the spark that ignited young adults' interest in the 2004 election. Young adults were more concerned with Iraq than older adults, and those for whom Iraq was the top issue were the most heavily involved young adults.

Table 2. Percent Paying Some or a Great Deal of Attention to the Campaign by Issue Concern

	Age 18-29	Age 30+
Iraq	72%	76%
Economy	48%	71%

When asked whether Iraq or the economy was the issue of greater concern, young adults by a narrow margin of 48 to 46 percent picked Iraq. However, the two issue groups differed substantially in their level of campaign involvement. Among those identifying Iraq as the major concern, 72 percent said they were paying relatively close attention to the campaign, compared with only 48 percent of those who had named the economy as their top issue. Young adults concerned primarily with Iraq were also more than twice as likely as those concerned mainly with the economy to say they had a campaign-related conversation within the past day.

These tendencies were class related. Among young adults with a college background—precisely those who would be expected to converse more frequently about politics—Iraq substantially outranked the economy as the issue of greater concern. Among young adults who had not attended college, the economy was cited more often as the larger issue.

Tuning Out and Tuning In: The Conventions and the Debates

A presidential campaign is punctuated by key moments when citizens sit up, take notice, and more actively listen and learn. The early primaries are key moments, as are the summer conventions and the October debates.

The National Party Conventions. Although the conventions no longer have a deliberative role, they each hold the national spotlight for a week, during which election coverage intensifies, as does public involvement. On the average day during the first convention, for example, 42 percent of young adults engaged in an election-related conversation, up from 15 percent in our pre-convention survey.

Nevertheless, young adults were less interested than older adults in the conventions. On the typical night, two-thirds of young adults did not watch any of the convention telecast and only one in five (compared with one in three older adults) watched for a half hour or more.

Unlike other indicators of involvement, convention viewing did not increase in 2004 from its level in 2000, among either young or older adults. This development is attributable to the decision of the three major broadcast networks —ABC, CBS, and NBC— to reduce their coverage. They each averaged 5 hours of coverage in 2000, but only 3 hours in 2004. According to our survey, about half of the convention audience consisted of viewers who “just came across” the convention while watching television and decided to watch some of it. The broadcast networks are the key to capturing these “inadvertent viewers” (a disproportionate number of whom are young adults). For one thing, roughly a sixth of America’s television households do not have cable or satellite and thus are dependent on broadcast coverage. For another, many cable viewers habitually monitor ABC, CBS, and NBC and do not routinely monitor CNN, MSNBC, and Fox. Thus, when a convention is being televised on the broadcast networks, viewers are more likely to come across it and some will choose to watch it.

More than three-fifths of all inadvertent viewers were drawn to the convention telecast while watching a broadcast channel. Cable television, despite its far more extensive coverage, pulled in less than two-fifths of such viewers. The audience ratings tell the story. When the broadcast networks were covering the 2004 conventions, the national audience was never less than 15 million television households. During the hours when cable network coverage only was available, the audience never reached as high as 8 million.

The October Debates. Unlike the 2004 conventions, the October debates had a largely deliberate audience. Our survey of the first debate found that 80 percent of debate viewers turned on their televisions expressly to watch the event. The debate audience was also much larger than the convention audience. Two thirds of our respondents claimed to have watched at least a portion of the first debate.

However, young adults were less interested than older ones in the first debate. Compared with 69 percent of older adults, 59 percent of young adults watched

at least a portion of the debate. Moreover, while 84 percent of older adult viewers were deliberate viewers, only 63 percent of young adults were of this type. Because younger viewers were less likely to tune in from the start, they also saw fewer minutes of the debate on average.

By comparison with 2000, however, young adults in 2004 took much greater interest in the first debate. Twice as many young adults watched the first debate as saw it in 2000, and more than three times as many watched “most” or “all” of it.

Table 3. How Much of the First Presidential Debate Did You Watch?

	Age 18-29		Age 30+	
	2000	2004	2000	2004
All	4%	14%	9%	28%
Most	4%	14%	9%	17%
Some	4%	14%	6%	12%
A little	4%	16%	13%	12%
None	84%	41%	64%	31%

Election Day

Initial assessments of voter turnout in 2004 were badly off the mark, missing both the surge in turnout overall and among young adults. Reporters erred in part because they overlooked the large number of absentee ballots, many of which (more than 7 million) were not included in the early unofficial vote totals. The reporting also erred because journalists got trapped in their story line, having predicted that Kerry would win if young adults showed up in huge numbers. When he lost and when exit polls indicated that young adults were roughly the same percentage of the voting electorate as they had been in 2000, reporters concluded that young adults had not responded.

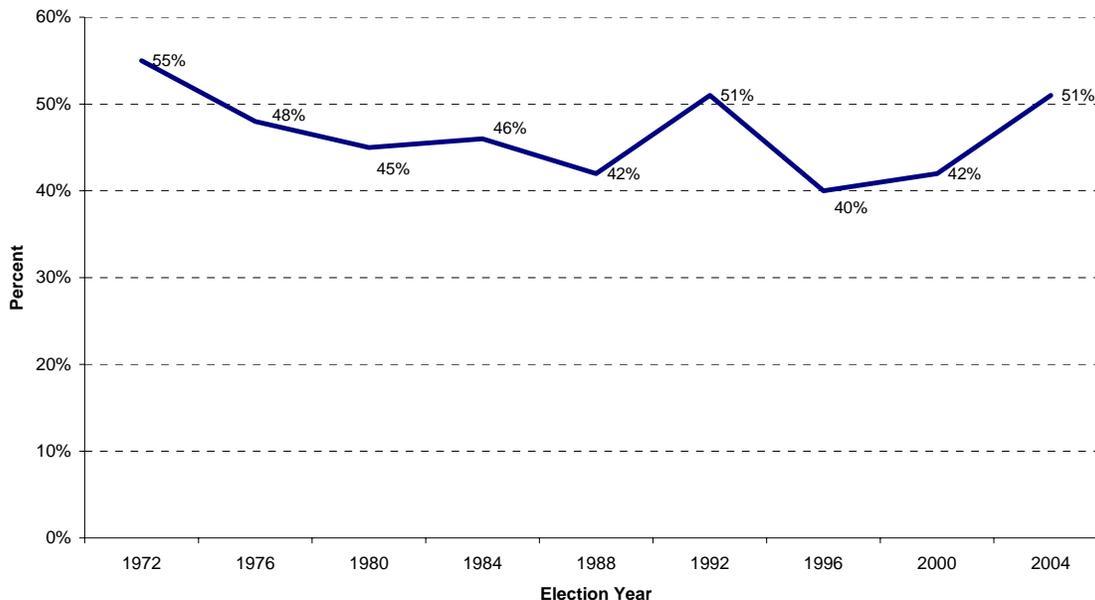
In fact, turnout among eligible adults under 30 years old rose by 9 percentage points, pushing their voting rate to over 50 percent (see Figure 1). Their turnout rate in battleground states—such as Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania—exceeded 60 percent.⁴

Reasons for Voting. Young voters offered many of the same reasons as older voters when asked why they voted, but there were also some differences.⁵ Young voters were more likely (96 percent versus 84 percent) to cite election issues as a driving force in their decision to vote. They were also more likely (67 percent versus 51 percent) to say they voted “because I really liked one of the candidates.” Their dislike of a particular candidate was an even stronger motivation. Eighty-three percent of young voters, compared to only 46 percent of older voters, said they voted in part “because I really disliked one of the candidates.”

⁴ The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, “Youth Turnout Up Sharply in 2004,” press release, November 3, 2004.

⁵ Our post-election survey, like all other surveys, found that respondents over reported their turnout. Nearly 80 percent of respondents claimed to have voted in the 2004 election. As a result, only about 200 respondents identified themselves as non-voters. Accordingly, this section of the paper defines young voters as those under 35 years of age as a means of increasing the number of respondents in this category.

Figure 1. Voter Turnout Among Young Adults



Source: The Pew Charitable Trust, report of October 11, 2004, for 1972-2000 data; CIRCLE report of November 3, 2004, for 2004 data. Based on vote-eligible adults 18-29 years of age as opposed to all adults within this age group.

Personal contact affected the turnout decisions of young and older voters but through different channels. Three times as many young voters (54 percent versus 18 percent) said that a reason they voted was because “my family or friends encouraged me to vote.” On the other hand, young voters were less likely than older ones to say that campaign or group contact had influenced their turnout decision. In fact, group or campaign contacts were cited by fewer than 10 percent of young voters as compared with twice that many older voters. Young adults are less likely to be listed on party rolls or to have a permanent residency and accordingly are less likely to be contacted through routine canvassing efforts.

Reasons for Not Voting. Non-voting among young and older adults also had some distinguishing features. The perennial complaints of non-voting were voiced less often by young non-voters. Compared with older ones, they were less likely to identify a lack of interest in or disgust with politics as a reason for not voting. They were also less likely to say that they did not vote because they found politics overly complicated.

On the other hand, young non-voters were more likely to cite eligibility obstacles as a reason for their failure to participate. A third of young non-voters, compared with a fifth of older ones, said that a reason for their non-participation was that they had moved and had not yet registered at their new location. More narrowly, young non-voters were more likely to cite registration mistakes or a lack of registration knowledge as a reason why they did not vote.

The adoption of same-day registration by all states would resolve some of these problems. Six states—New Hampshire, Maine, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Wyoming, and Idaho—have same-day registration, which allows eligible citizens to register at their neighborhood polling station on Election Day. North Dakota has no registration requirement, in effect making it a same-day registration state. These states are among the leaders in turnout rate and even more so when young-adult turnout is the benchmark. Same-day registration increases the likelihood that citizens will know when, where, and how to register, and it accommodates those individuals who have recently changed residence. For young adults, these advantages are considerable.⁶

Will Participation Remain High?

In most elections after 1960, first-time eligible voters participated at a lower rate than the previous group of first-time eligibles.⁷ In 2004, young adults returned to the polls in such large numbers that nearly the entire decades-long decline was recouped. Will the momentum be sustained?

It cannot be assumed that a healthy increase in turnout in a single election marks a turnaround in the longer-term pattern. Turnout jumped 5 percentage points in 1992 among younger and older voters alike, only to fall by an even larger amount four years later.

High turnout in 2004 owed to a confluence of powerful issues, Iraq and the economy particularly, and to a polarizing president. (The gap in George W. Bush's approval ratings between Republicans and Democrats was the highest in the 70-year history of the Gallup Poll). If these factors are still in play in 2008, that election, too, is virtually certain to produce high turnout. If they are not in play, and the intense partisanship of the moment dissipates, it is uncertain whether young adults will again flock to the polls. Some of the young adults drawn to the 2004 campaign by its issues, personalities, and intense partisanship will continue to participate. But others may withdraw. The United States could be entering an era of electoral participation unlike those that characterized most of the twentieth century. Then, participation followed a cyclical pattern—lengthy periods of rising or high turnout followed by lengthy periods of falling or low turnout. The current era might in the end more closely resemble the pattern of the late nineteenth century. After the Civil War and before the Progressive period, turnout varied substantially—as much as 10 percentage points—from one election to the next, depending on the strength of an election's issues. Turnout in recent presidential elections—1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004—has fluctuated in that way. Today's citizens could turn out to be selective voters, turning out in relatively high numbers only when they find the issues compelling. There is certainly nothing in the turnout levels of recent primary and midterm elections that indicate Americans are eager for opportunities to cast a ballot.

⁶ See Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp.133-134, 179-180.

⁷ For example, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures, turnout among eighteen to twenty-four year olds in the eight elections between 1972 and 2000 was 50, 42, 40, 41, 34, 41, 32, and 31, respectively.

Even if that should change, one participation gap—that between the college and non-college educated—seems unlikely to change. Our surveys indicated that young adults with a college background were nearly as attentive to the 2004 election as older adults. On the other hand, most of the non-college young were at best only marginally interested. In recent decades, the gap between the turnout rate of college and non-college youth has widened, and the 2004 campaign did nothing to close it. The challenge ahead will include the task of discovering how to bring America's less advantaged youth into the electoral process.

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