

ANALYSIS OF YOUNG VOTERS IN THE 2008 ELECTION

These days, everyone is talking about the youth vote. Following close presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, both political parties are turning to this demographic in an effort to increase historically low youth turnout, with the hope that this increase might help them carry the election. Sen. Barack Obama's message and idealism seem to have appealed to young voters, noticeably increasing mobilization and involvement among them.ⁱ It remains to be seen whether this enthusiasm will carry over to the election and make 2008 the year the youth vote counted, or whether previous trends will continue among young voters.

18-29 Year-Old Voters Midterm Election Years

1974	29.5%
1978	29.3%
1982	31.7%
1986	28.2%
1990	27.3%
1994	26.1%
1998	22.3%
2002	22.5%
2006	25.5%

Presidential Election Year

1972	55.4%
1976	48.8%
1980	48.2%
1984	49.1%
1988	43.8%
1992	52.0%
1996	39.6%
2000	40.3%

Source: Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement

1972 is the year to match or even beat for the youth vote. This was the first election that occurred after the passage of the 26th Amendment, which extended the right to vote to 18-year-olds.ⁱⁱ Whether due to the novelty or the increasing opposition to the Vietnam War and the draft, an impressive 55% of possible 18 to 29-year-old voters turned out to the polls that year.ⁱⁱⁱ This figure has yet to be matched.

In the years since 1972, the youth vote has lost its power, with a majority of eligible young people voting only in the 1992 election. Midterm elections rarely see a young voter turnout surpassing 25%.^{iv} Young people with the opportunity to vote for the first time have been increasingly unlikely to vote as well, with only 28% voting in the 2000 presidential election.^v In some ways, young voter turnout mirrors and exaggerates trends among the general population; turnout for voters overall has been in decline until recently and dipped to its lowest point in the 1996 and 2000 elections.^{vi} Overall, trends indicate that young voters are more likely to turn out during a presidential election, more likely to be Democrats, and less likely to vote than older voters.^{vii}

Despite increases in youth turnout in 2004,^{viii} 18 to 24-year-olds were the only demographic with a turnout rate lower than 50%; individuals above the age of 35 had a turnout rate

of more than 64%.^{ix} In the United States, the older you are, the more likely you are to vote, with even the 25 to 29-year-old demographic consistently more likely to vote than 18 to 24-year-olds.

The increased youth turnout in the 2004 presidential election and in the 2006 midterm election may signal a long-term shift in voting trends. In 2004, voting by individuals under 30 years of

age rose by almost 10%, a significant increase.^x The primary elections of 2008 saw a record number of young people going to the polls as well. Six and a half million voters under 30 went to the polls, almost doubling the previous national youth turnout rate.^{xi} Sixteen states witnessed a rise in young voters, with many experiencing drastic increases.^{xii} Voter registration rolls have swelled with new registrants.

As the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement's "Wrap-Up of 2008 Primary Youth Vote" report notes, the increase in primary turnout by young voters is in line with the trend observed in previous presidential and congressional general elections.^{xiii} In addition, young people themselves see this election as a turning point; a CBS/ MTV poll noted that 31% of young people said they will have as much or more influence over who the next president will be than older voters. This number is up from 17% in 2007.^{xiv} With the trend continuing, and candidates specifically engaging young people, members of the millennial generation are on target for another record turnout on Nov. 4.

Coming out of the primaries, the economy was far and away the most important issue for young people. A Harvard Institute of Politics poll found that 39% of 18 to 24-year-olds ranked the economy as the most important issue. The next most important issue, the war in Iraq, garnered 15% of the answer.^{xv} A CBS/ MTV poll conducted during the primaries also showed the economy as the top issue. Surprisingly, at that time, young people thought that the candidates' positions on the economy were fairly clear, but they wanted to hear more about the candidates' positions on the war in Iraq.^{xvi}

In the months since the primaries, the economy has continued to be the top concern of young people. The most recent Harvard Institute of Politics poll found that the economy is 10 times more important to young people today than it was a year ago. In this poll, 53% of young people said economic issues were their top concern, compared to 5% in the fall of 2007.^{xvii} The war in Iraq was named as a top issue by only 9% of young people. In the October USA Today/ Gallup survey of 18 to 29-year-olds, 89% said that how the candidates planned to deal with the economic crisis was extremely or very important to them.

Today, 69% of 18 to 24-year-olds, or 7 in 10, say that political engagement is an effective way of solving our nation's problems, and fewer than 28% say that politics is not relevant to their lives.^{xviii} Current polls claim that 56% of 18 to 24-year-olds definitely plan to vote in the 2008 election.^{xix} Should these numbers prove true on Election Day, this would be the largest youth turnout since 1972, when the voting age was lowered to 18.^{xx} These polls, conducted by USA Today, Gallup, and MTV, with input by students at American University, seek to further explore the issues important to young people, the methods and media they find engaging, and the candidates they are supporting. Should young voter turnout indeed dramatically increase, it is certain that these methods and issues will become increasingly important in future elections.

The Horserace

Obama Holds 20-Point Lead Among Young Voters

In the poll conducted by USA Today/Gallup from Oct. 13-19, Sen. Barack Obama led Sen. John McCain 58%-38% among young voters. While Obama's numbers are virtually unchanged since the poll of young voters conducted by USA Today/Gallup for MTV from Sept. 18-28, McCain has made some gains even as Obama maintains a clear advantage. With less than two weeks left until Election Day, McCain would have to substantially increase the rate at which he converts young voters to support his candidacy in order to simply tie Obama in the young voter category.

2008 Presidential Election Polling of Young Voters

	Sept. 18-28	Oct. 13-19
Barack Obama	61%	58%
John McCain	32%	38%
Other (VOL)	1%	1%
DK	5%	3%

*Margin of error for the Sept. poll was +/- 5%.

*Margin of error for the Oct. poll was +/- 4.5%.

Among specific demographic groups, Obama appears to be leading in a few key areas, with women supporting him over John McCain by a near 2-to-1 margin.

Oct. 13-19 USA Today/Gallup Poll by Gender

	Male	Female
Barack Obama	54%	62%
John McCain	43%	33%

Racially, young white voters are evenly split in their support of Obama and McCain, while non-whites (African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and others) overwhelmingly support Obama. 95% of young African-Americans support Obama and the other 5% said they are leaning in Obama's direction.

Oct. 13-19 USA Today/Gallup Poll by Race

	White Voters	Non-White Voters
Barack Obama	47%	85%
John McCain	49%	15%

The level of education among young voters does not seem to play as large of a role as race or gender, given that support for the candidates appears relatively consistent across educational groups.

Oct. 13-19 USA Today/Gallup Poll by Education

	College Graduate	Non-College Graduate
Barack Obama	53%	60%
John McCain	43%	37%

How has the importance of religion affected the race thus far?

Evangelicals have been cited as an integral demographic whose support played a significant role in propelling George W. Bush to the presidency in 2000, and ensured his reelection in 2004. However, this presidential campaign did not produce a candidate from either party that particularly excited or appealed to Evangelical voters.

Among young voters who responded to a question about the importance of religion in their daily lives, those who said that religion was an important part of their daily life favored Obama with 49% over McCain’s 44%. Meanwhile, Obama was favored by a 40-point margin among those who said religion was not an important part of their daily life.

Among those young voters supporting Barack Obama or John McCain:

	Is religion an important part of your daily life?	
	Yes	No
Barack Obama	49%	65%
John McCain	45%	24%

How do these findings compare to those over the age of 30?

Support for Barack Obama from those over the age of 30 is comparatively less than support from 18 to 29-year-old voters. Obama led in all age groups polled from Oct. 13-19, but his margin was much smaller especially among senior citizens, who split 45% for Obama and 43% for John McCain. Obama led McCain by 50% to 45% with 30 to 49-year-olds and 52% to 41% among 50 to 64-year-olds.

Should Obama carry his 20-point advantage among young voters to those voters over the age of 30, and if there is indeed a strong turnout of young people and African American voters, this election could be the largest blowout since the presidential election of 1964, when Democratic incumbent President Lyndon Johnson defeated Republican challenger Barry Goldwater with 60% of the popular vote. However, white voters, blue-collar voters and older voters still show some concerns about Obama, and they could offset some of these apparent margins in key swing states.

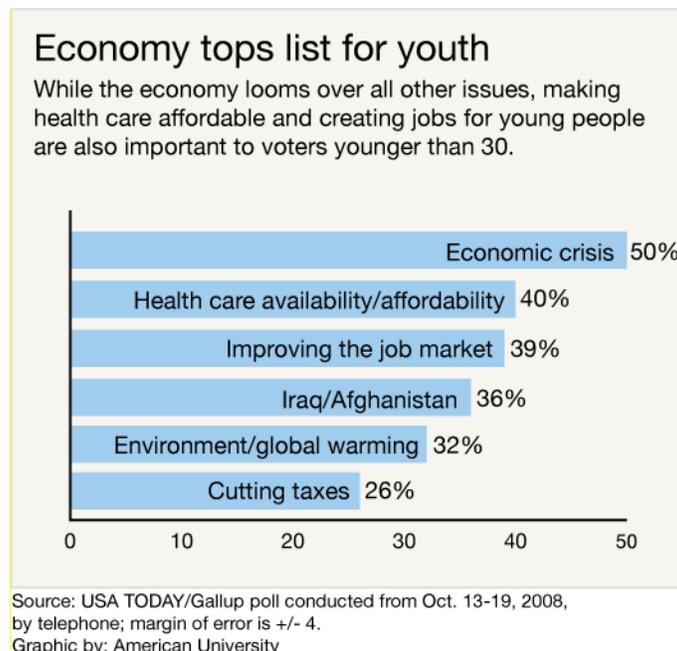
The Issues

What Issues Matter to Young People

In the USA Today/Gallup poll, American University students sought to determine which issues were most influential and important to young people in deciding how to vote. Of the six issues examined — the environment, the economy, current military conflicts, health care, job creation, and tax cuts — the economic crisis was, unsurprisingly, the top issue of importance among young adults.

Top Six Issues by Importance to Young Voters

	Extremely <u>important</u>	Extremely+ <u>Very important</u>	Somewhat+ <u>Not important</u>
Dealing with the economic crisis	50%	91%	9%
Making health care more available/affordable	40%	81%	19%
Creating jobs for people new to the job market	39%	82%	18%
Dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan	36%	74%	24%
Protecting the environment/global warming	32%	67%	33%
Cutting taxes	26%	63%	36%



All six issues proved to be important decision-influencing factors for young people. More than 60% of respondents claimed that each issue was either extremely or very important in influencing their vote. Somewhat surprisingly, cutting taxes — a key part of both candidates’

economic platforms — polled low on the list of priorities for young people. Only one out of every four respondents claimed that it would be extremely important in influencing their vote, and more than one-third of young people said cutting taxes was only somewhat important or not important at all.

There were interesting demographic differences among the issue priorities as well. Women found health care and the environment more influential to their vote than men; conservatives felt that the environment was less likely to influence their vote; and individuals with less education were the most concerned about the job market. An equally interesting result of this survey was the difference between genders in their reaction to the U.S. military conflicts. 44% of young women compared to 29% of young men said that dealing with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was extremely important to them.

Which Candidate Would Handle the Issues Better?

Young people were then asked which candidate they felt would do a better job in handling each of the six issues. Obama held an advantage over McCain on every issue, though the size of that advantage varied from question to question.

Which Candidate Would Do a Better Job

	<u>Obama</u>	<u>McCain</u>
Making health care more available/affordable	68%	24%
Protecting the environment/global warming	66%	24%
Creating jobs for people new to the job market	65%	28%
Dealing with the economic crisis	60%	33%
Cutting taxes	52%	38%
Dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan	47%	45%

Margin by which Obama is favored on the issues



Source: USA TODAY/Gallup poll conducted from Oct. 13-19, 2008, by telephone; margin of error is +/- 4.
Graphic by: American University

Obama’s greatest issue strengths among young adults are health care and the environment. In relation to the top issue of priority among young people, “dealing with the economic crisis,” McCain polled slightly better, but Obama still has a 27-point advantage. Even on the issue of cutting taxes that John McCain has set as a central tenet of his platform, young people favored Obama. It is only on the issue of dealing with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that young people appear almost equally split.

McCain has the advantage as the candidate who can better deal with Iraq and Afghanistan among those who identify themselves as very conservative, conservative and (narrowly) among moderates. He also has the advantage among those who have served in the military.

The Job Market

Job creation ranked second (tied with the environment) as the most important issue among young people, and again, Obama was favored by a wide margin. We found that regardless of education level, young people favored Obama on this issue. But when asked if they had heard candidates talk about their plans to improve the job market for young people, nearly half (44%) said they had not heard Obama speak about this. Likewise, 62% had not heard McCain talk about his plan for job creation either, so this does not seem to have hurt Obama disproportionately:

Have You Heard About the Candidates’ Plans to Improve the Job Market for Young People?

	Yes, have heard	No, have not
John McCain	36%	62%
Barack Obama	55%	44%

The Economic Crisis: Who Will Pay?

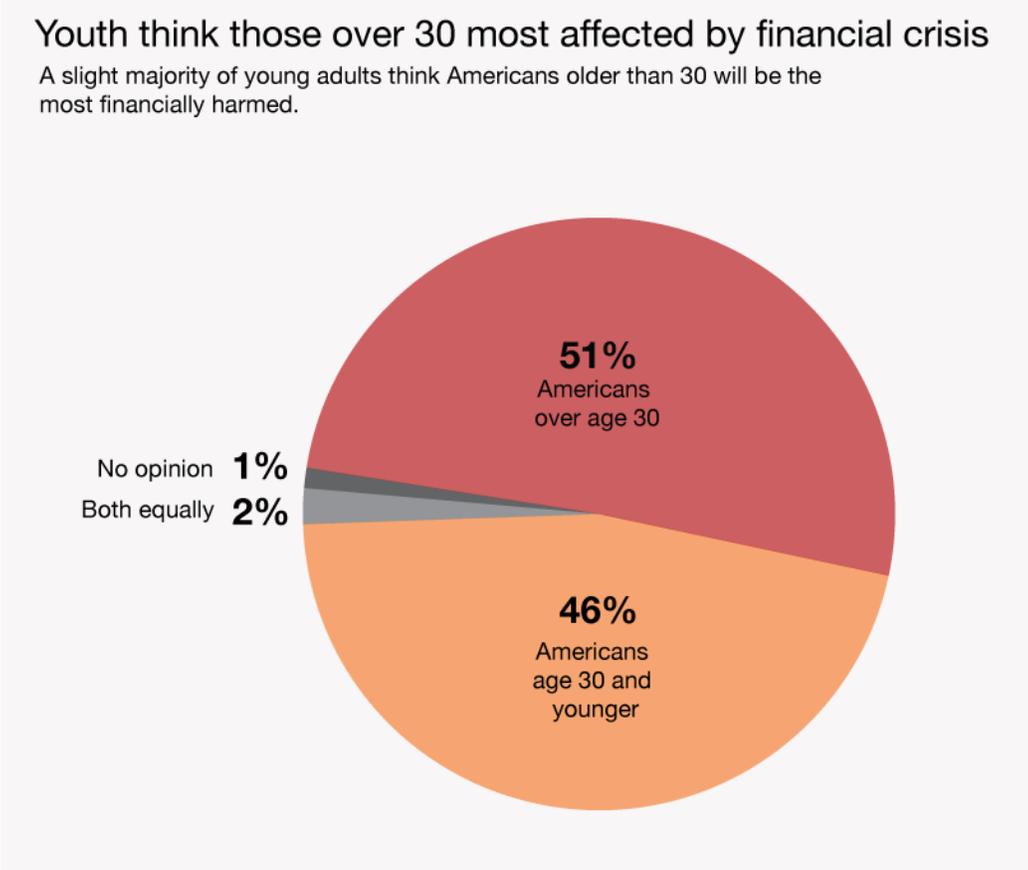
Just over half of 18 to 29-year-olds said that their own financial situation had been harmed a great deal or moderate amount by the economic events this fall, but 44% said their situation was not harmed much or at all.

How much do you think your own financial situation has been harmed by the events of the last month – a great deal, a moderate amount, not much, or not at all?

	Moderate			
<u>Great deal</u>	<u>amount</u>	<u>Not much</u>	<u>Not at all</u>	<u>No opinion</u>
22%	33%	28%	16%	1%

The 18 to 29-year-olds without a college education were most affected with 59% saying they had been harmed, while 45% of those with a college education or more said that had been harmed as well.

Young people are split on the question of which generation of Americans will bear the burden of the financial crisis in the long run, though a slight majority say that Americans over 30 years old will be harmed more.



Source: USA TODAY/Gallup poll conducted from Oct. 13-19, 2008, by telephone; margin of error is +/- 4.
Graphic by: American University

The Candidates

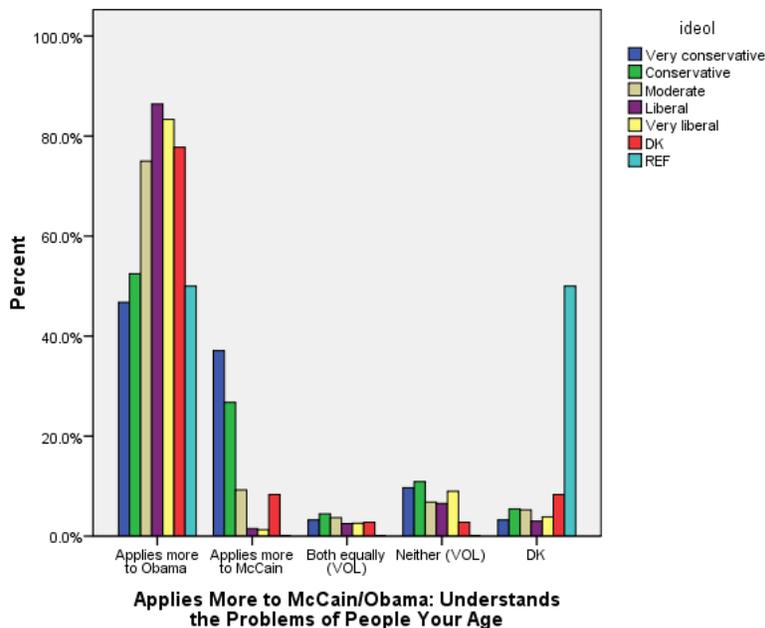
Candidate Perceptions

How candidates are perceived plays a crucial role in what voters decide on Election Day. Barack Obama earned higher perception marks among young people when matched against John McCain in all categories, ranging from his showing of good judgment (54%-29%) to his ability to inspire (67%-18%). McCain earned his highest marks in being seen as a strong and decisive leader, but young people still favored Obama by a 46% to 37% margin in that category.

Among young people, questions of age and experience give McCain his only advantage — though very slight — over Obama. While 57% think Obama has enough experience to be president, 59% think McCain is not too old to be president.

Who relates to young people?

Young people overwhelmingly believe that Obama understands their problems better than McCain. Obama wins this category across all ideological groups, even among the very conservative.



But who are young people actually going to vote for?

Though Obama leads heavily among young people, this does not mean that all of them are ready to vote for the Illinois senator. In fact, 66% of conservatives are still planning to vote for McCain, while 73% of liberals are voting for Obama.

Qualities of the Candidates

When asked which candidate is a strong and decisive leader, the responses fell mostly along partisan lines. However, moderates are almost evenly split with McCain receiving a 3% edge.

Young people overwhelmingly said that Obama has the best sense of humor by a 58% to 17% margin. When broken down by level of education, people with a high school education think Obama has a better sense of humor than McCain by a 4-to-1 margin. That lead narrows to a 3-to-1 margin among those who have some college education, and diminishes a bit further among college graduates, with 2-to-1 for Obama.

Who offers real change from the Bush Administration?

Only Republicans see McCain as real change from the Bush administration. Overall, 56% of those polled think a McCain administration would be a continuation of the Bush administration. 36% of conservatives agree with this notion, along with 54% of moderates and 75% of liberals.

Personal Connections to the Candidates

When examining questions concerning which presidential candidate young adults would rather participate in various activities with, the respondents showed an overwhelming preference for Barack Obama on many accounts. Among other questions, 18 to 29-year-olds were asked which candidate they would prefer to have a beer with, which candidate they would prefer as their teacher, whose diary they would rather read, and who they would rather have as their boss.

While Obama was consistently more popular among all 18 to 29-year-olds for each question, John McCain emerged on top in certain categories among specific demographics. A respondent's level of education, income and geographic region were important factors when cross-examining this data.

Which candidate would you most want to...

...have a beer with?

In analyzing with whom young people would rather have a beer with based on region, the South favored McCain in a higher proportion than any other region. The West, Midwest and East preferred having a beer with Obama. The fact that the South preferred spending time with McCain rather than Obama is consistent with the current electoral map. The South, with the exception of Florida, is a strong Republican region. Nevertheless, if regional variables are ignored, and one examines the results based entirely on numbers, the vast majority of those sampled prefer to have a drink with Obama.

Even young veterans said they would prefer drinking with Obama. Given McCain's history as a war hero and fervent supporter of the armed forces, one would expect him to be popular among young military personnel. While this finding does not necessarily mean they are going to vote for Obama, it again highlights Obama's popularity with young people.

...have as a teacher in class?

In examining whom 18 to 29-year-olds would prefer to have as their teacher based on education level, there was a clear preference for Obama. Regardless of education level, young adults largely chose Obama over McCain. In general, the higher the educational level of the respondent, the more inclined they were to choose having McCain as a teacher. However, those respondents were still a small minority in comparison to those preferring Obama.

	Obama	McCain
Have a beer with	52%	27%
Have as a teacher	65%	27%
Read his private diary	39%	43%
Have as a boss	63%	28%
Ask for advice	51%	36%

Source: USA TODAY/Gallup poll conducted from Oct. 13-19, 2008, by telephone; margin of error is +/- 4. Graphic by: American University

...have as your boss?

Young adults were twice as likely to choose Obama to have as their boss, especially when examined by the income levels of the respondents. While McCain was popular among respondents earning between \$30,000 and \$74,999 annually, Obama was still nearly twice as popular in this income bracket.

...read the private diary of?

Examining which diary 18 to 29-year-olds preferred to read between the two candidates provided another interesting finding for McCain. This was the only category among these questions where more young people preferred McCain to Obama. Those who had completed high school or below favored reading Obama's diary, while those who had completed some or all of college favored reading McCain's diary. Those with a post-graduate degree also favored reading McCain's diary, 2-to-1. However, more conservatives wanted to read Obama's diary.

Who Are the Young Voters?

For this survey, USA Today/Gallup/American University completed n=598 interviews with 18 to 29-year-olds, between October 13-19, 2008 using both landline and cellular phones.

Demographic Profile:

- 51% are male, 49% are female.
- 57% are between the ages of 18 and 24, 43% are between the ages of 25 and 29.
- 64% are white, 7% are Hispanic, 12% are African-American.
- 31% answered on a cell phone, 69% answered on a landline.
- 70% are employed, 30% are unemployed.
- 6% have served in the US Military.
- 32% are from the South, 21% are from the East, 22% are from the Midwest, 25% are from the West.
- 27% are married, 72% are not married.

Educational Profile:

- 14% reported that they had not completed high school.
- 29% reported their highest level of education was a high school degree.
- 31% reported they had completed at least some college.
- 13% reported their highest level of education was a college degree.
- 7% reported their highest level of education was a post-graduate degree.

Political and Ideological Profile:

- 73% say they are registered to vote; 23% say they are not registered.
- 70% have given "quite a lot" or "some" thought about the election.
- 95% say they will vote in the 2008 general election.
- 59% said religion is important in their daily life.
- 33% are Democrats, 20% lean Democrat, 10% are Independent, 10% lean Republican, and 26% are Republicans.
- 9% are very liberal, 22% are liberal, 35% are moderate, 23% are conservative, and 8% are very conservative.

How Young People Get Their Information

The Pew Internet and American Life Survey conducted in the spring of 2008 found that 50% of 18- to 29-year-olds, but only 15% of those over 65, looked at Web sites for political news. In the USA Today/Gallup/MTV survey conducted in September, 42% of people under thirty said they used online social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace to discuss the presidential campaign, although only 20% said they used these a great deal or a moderate amount.

Other than Facebook and MySpace, half the young respondents named other online sites that they looked to for political information. CNN.com topped this list, followed by Yahoo.com and MSN.com.

Interestingly, 45% of young respondents said there were no Web sites they checked often for political information.

Political Information Online

CNN.com	13%
Yahoo.com	9%
MSN.com	4%
NewYorkTimes.com	3%
FoxNews.com	3%
MSNBC.com	3%
Google.com	3%
BBC.com	2%
YouTube.com	2%
AOL.com	2%
Other	11%
None (vol.)	45%

MyBarackObama.com, DrudgeReport.com, MySpace.com, Politico.com, NBC.com, JohnMcCain.com, WashingtonPost.com, Digg.com, ABC.com, RealClearPolitics.com, FactCheck.org, and WallStreetJournal.com all received 1%.

were

Father and Mother Know Best

Influence on Political Views

Parents	54%
Political Commentators	46%
Friends	43%
Teachers	33%
Religious Leaders	31%
Celebrities	15%

When asked how much influence various people have on their political views, young people named parents as the top influence, with 54% saying they had a great deal of or moderate influence on their vote.

Interestingly, political commentators from TV, radio and the Web rank second, even above friends, though young people are known to value peer group opinions. Despite the rock

stars, sports figures and talk show hosts dotting the political landscape, 68% of young people say celebrities do not influence their vote.

TV Channel Impact

CNN	19%
FOX	9%
MSNBC	5%
Local channels	5%
NBC	5%
ABC	2%
The Daily Show	2%
Other	10%
None (vol.)	42%
Any/all (vol.)	2%
No opinion	6%

Comedy Central, BET, MTV, CBS, C-SPAN, The Colbert Report, The O'Reilly Factor, and PBS all received 1%.

CNN Again

42% of young people surveyed said that no television channel has an impact on their vote. Of those who did volunteer a channel, CNN was the top response, with 19% naming the Cable News Network.

Methodology

Data for this summary was based on two polls conducted by USA Today and Gallup and from focus groups held at American University. Results for the first poll are based on telephone interviews conducted Sept. 18-28, 2008, with a random sample of 903 U.S. adults between the ages of 18 and 29. The sample consists of 633 respondents who were randomly selected from a national sample of landline and cellular telephone numbers, and 270 respondents who had participated in earlier national Gallup polls and agreed to be re-interviewed for a future poll.

For results based on this sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the margin of sampling error is ± 4 percentage points. For results based on the sample of 742 registered voters between the ages of 18 and 29, the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 5 percentage points.

Questions developed by American University students were added to the October poll. The questions were partially determined through five focus groups conducted in various classes. Each focus group discussed issues that American youth are concerned about. The results for this poll are based on telephone interviews with 598 U.S. adults, aged 18 to 29, conducted Oct. 13-19, 2008.

For results based on the total sample of 18 to 29-year-olds, one can say with 95% confidence that the margin of sampling error is ± 4 percentage points. For results based on the sample of 476 registered voters between the ages of 18 and 29, the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 4.5 percentage points.

The samples are weighted by demographic information so that they are representative of 18 to 29-year-olds nationwide. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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Footnotes

- ⁱ Gallup Brain: History of the Youth Vote, Harvard Institute of Politics Youth Survey.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: Voter Turnout Since 1972.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Gallup Brain: History of the Youth Vote.
- ^{vi} Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: Voter Turnout Since 1972.
- ^{vii} Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: Voter Turnout Since 1972, Harvard Institute of Politics Youth Survey, USA Today: Why the GOP Lost the Youth Vote (<http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/04/why-the-gop-l-1.html>).
- ^{viii} Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: Voter Turnout Since 1972.
- ^{ix} U.S. Census Bureau: Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004 (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p20-556.pdf>).
- ^x Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: Voter Turnout Since 1972.
- ^{xi} Pew: Record Youth Voter Turnout for '08 Presidential Primaries and Caucuses.
- ^{xii} Ibid.
- ^{xiii} CIRCLE. "Wrap-Up of 2008 Primary Youth Vote."
- ^{xiv} CBS/ MTV. "State of the Youth Nation: 2008."
- ^{xv} Harvard Institute of Politics. "2008 Pre-Convention Survey Update."
- ^{xvi} CBS/ MTV. "State of the Youth Nation: 2008."
- ^{xvii} Harvard Institute of Politics. "Fall 2008 Survey."
- ^{xviii} Harvard Institute of Politics. "Fall 2008 Survey."
- ^{xix} Ibid, Harvard Institute of Politics Youth Survey.
- ^{xx} Pew: Record Youth Voter Turnout for '08 Presidential Primaries and Caucuses.