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WHY THEY VOTED:

YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

IN THE 21ST CENTURY

NICHOLAS KITCHEL

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

ADVISED BY TERRI BIMES, PH.D. AND RODNEY HERO, PH.D.

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Abstract: *Following the historical 2008 presidential election, academics and pundits alike marveled over the high voter turnout among youth. In 2008, 51 percent of those under the age of 30 turned out to vote. This compares with a mere 40 percent youth turnout rate in 2000. In the 2008 presidential election, 66 percent of youth votes were cast for Barack Obama. While it is clear from these figures that young people are becoming a more powerful political force, why they are becoming more engaged remains unclear. This study seeks to address why youth turned out in greater numbers in 2008 by examining three important variables: the impact of the 9/11 attacks, intensity of candidate preference, and voter contact. I track these variables using the American National Election Studies (ANES) times series data, drawing comparisons with 2000, when youth turnout was historically low. An analysis of these variables among different age groups in 2000 and 2008 reveals that the Millennial generation displayed an overwhelming candidate preference for Barack Obama and was directly targeted by the Democratic Party during the campaign, although the impact of the 9/11 attacks appears to be marginal at best. However, given that the Millennials are still in their youth, it is unclear whether their voting trends will be sustained, or whether the high turnout in 2008 was simply a phenomenon unique to Barack Obama's candidacy.*

Keywords: *Youth vote, 2008 presidential election, civic engagement, voter turnout, Millennials*

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1 Introduction

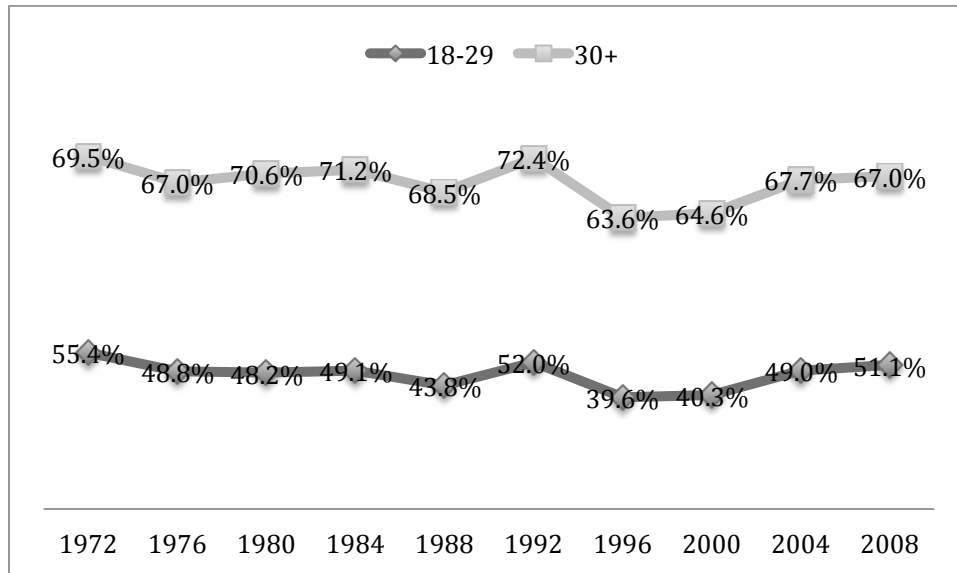
In the 21st century, young people have become increasingly more organized, more engaged, and more influential in the political process. In the historical 2008 presidential election, young people volunteered more, donated more, and ultimately voted in higher numbers than they had in previous years (Pew Research Center 2008). This begs the question: *Why?* In this thesis, I question *why* this generation of young people – known as the Millennials¹ – turned out in historically high numbers in 2008. Specifically, which factors contributed to increased turnout among young people? This thesis seeks to address these questions.

A number of political scientists have observed and studied an overall downward trend in voter participation since the 1960s (see: Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital* and Richard Boyd’s *Decline of U.S. Voter Turnout: Structural Explanations*). However, turnout rate in the 2008 presidential election painted a remarkably different picture. In 2008, overall turnout rate among those eligible to vote was 61.6 percent. This was the third consecutive increase in presidential year voter turnout since the recent low point of 51.7 percent in 1996 (McDonald 2008). The increase in turnout among youth was even more salient. As depicted in Figure 1-1, turnout among eligible 18-29 year olds increased from 39.6 percent in 1996 to 51.1 percent in 2008 – an increase of 11.5 points. Since these observations were made, academic focus has been placed on explaining the increase in voter turnout we witnessed in 2008, and specifically,

¹ Pew Research Center defines “Millennials” as those born after 1980 (no chronological end point has been set). In 2014, Millennials are 19 to 33 years old (Pew Research Center 2010).

why and how young people were compelled to turn out in higher numbers. It is within this context that my thesis is written.

Figure 1-1 Presidential Election Year Voter Turnout by Age, 1972-2008



This graph was constructed utilizing CIRCLE's tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2008²

From a quick glance, the youth turnout in Figure 1-1 appears to have been fairly stable since 1972. However, the premise of this thesis is that youth turnout rate had remarkably escalated in 2008. In fact, many scholars, reporters, and pundits have commented on how youth voting has notably climbed. I have included Figure 1-1 to illustrate the larger historical trends. In recent history, voting *has* climbed significantly, but overall, 2008 voting levels were simply returning to numbers similar to the high youth turnout rate we saw in 1992, when Bill Clinton defeated George H. W. Bush, and in 1972, when incumbent president Richard Nixon was reelected to office (Herald and Jaeger 2008). Additionally, while this thesis does compare the youth to other age cohorts, the main focus is to examine specifically why the youth cohort's voter participation rate

² For more on how voter turnout is calculated, see Chapter 3.

climbed in 2008. While the variables studied may be applicable to other age groups, this thesis specifically questions how they affected voter turnout among the youth demographic.

Specifically, this thesis focuses on three key variables: the impact of the 9/11 attacks on young people, intensity of candidate preferences, and youth voter contact. In the literature surrounding youth voting, respected academics have mentioned all three of these variables as potential drivers of youth engagement. Therefore, I use survey data provided by the American National Election Studies to run mean tabulations of these variables among different age cohorts over time. I specifically focus on the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential years. The 2000 election was selected because of its historically low turnout among youth. The 2008 election was selected because of its high youth turnout. Finally, 2004 was selected in order to create more context for my analyses and illustrate whether the observations from 2008 were any different from those in 2004, when George W. Bush was running for reelection.

I also include two regression analyses in this study. The first is conducted with voter participation as the dependent variable and the three aforementioned independent variables, as well as several known demographic correlates of voter turnout as controls. The goal of this analysis is to test the statistical significance of each primary variable, as well as the significance of demographic correlates in driving voter turnout in 2000, 2004, and 2008.

The second regression analysis is designed to determine which characteristics correlate with the likelihood of a young person being contacted by the Democratic or Republican campaigns during the 2000, 2004 and 2008 election years. Voter contact is

used as the dependent variable and partisanship and voter registration status are the independent covariates.

Ultimately, using the data from the mean tabulations and regression analyses, I show that candidate preference and voter contact were both correlated with youth voter turnout, while the 9/11-related variables were not sustained through 2008. Furthermore, I show that partisans and registered voters were more likely to be contacted by the Democratic Party, although the regression output from Republican Party contact was not statistically significant.

While I hoped to study the relationship between online outreach and youth voter trends, the lack of available data rendered this impossible. As discussed in the subsequent chapter, many pundits and academics believe the online outreach may have had a significant impact on youth voting. However, since this sort of outreach is so new, there is little data available to back these theories. The ANES database I used did not include variables pertaining to online outreach for all the case years studied in this thesis.

2 Theories of Youth Engagement

I. Introduction

In recent history, scholars have produced a significant amount of research on the subject of youth political engagement. Some have focused on differential vote share amongst youth of varying race, gender, and education levels, while others have considered alternative types of civic engagement, like volunteering, donating, or protesting. My research is concerned with youth voter turnout over time. Scholars have shown that youth turnout has varied significantly over the past century. While there has been a general trend of decreased youth turnout since the 1960s, it has risen in recent years. Specifically, my research is focused on explaining *why* young people voted in higher numbers in the 2008 presidential election. I believe this is the most appropriate question to explicate this generation's commitment to civic engagement (or perhaps lack thereof).

There are four schools of thought I am examining. The first is Robert Putnam's cultural shift theory. Essentially, he claims that 9/11 triggered a cultural shift in patriotism and community values that led to the increase in youth civic engagement that we saw in 2004 and 2008. This theory is interesting because it implies a generational shift, which would have long-lasting implications on American voting trends.

The second theory I am exploring asks to what extent youth voter engagement was influenced by intensity of voters' candidate preferences. President Obama – a young, energetic, and charismatic candidate – appealed to youth much more than his opponent did in 2008. If this theory is the prime reason youth were engaged, then perhaps their

increased political involvement is simply a candidate-induced anomaly and not a long-term trend.

Third, I look at the influence of communication technology advancements on youth civic engagement. The advent of social media websites lowered the individual cost of political participation and provided a new and fitting medium for candidates to reach young voters. If proven, this theory would have significant implications for how candidates can effectively communicate with young voters.

Finally, I look at the effect of mobilization efforts. Were young people engaged primarily because the Obama campaign made an effort to target them? The answer to this question is likely *yes*, but my research will explore how this theory compares to the aforementioned schools of thought. Historically, a number of political campaigns have written off young people as politically irrelevant (or minimally relevant) because they did not turn out to vote in high numbers. Examining mobilization efforts will show how and to what extent the Obama campaign's efforts politically activated young people.

As I seek to explain the driving factors that activated youth to turn out to vote in greater numbers in 2008, I believe these four theories will all prove relevant to varying degrees. Cumulatively, I believe they will provide a strong picture of why youth were engaged in recent years.

II. The 9/11 Experience

In 1995, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. In his paper (and subsequent book), Putnam argues that America's civic society had decreased over the past two to three decades. He explains that people had become increasingly less engaged with each other and that social

structures had dissipated over time (Putnam 1995). Thus the metaphor “bowling alone” evokes an image of the United States where community-related activities and institutions have declined and society is much more individualistic. As such, social capital and civic engagement has diminished, leading to lower voting rates.

In 2010, Putnam and Thomas Sandler jointly published *Still Bowling Alone? The Post-9/11 Split*. This paper was essentially an overhaul of *Bowling Alone*. Putnam argues that the 9/11 attacks did not damage America’s resolve, but rather “strengthened the civic conscience of young people in the United States” (Sandler & Putnam 2010, 10).

Essentially, Putnam’s claim is that Millennials – those born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s – experienced 9/11 during a stage in their lives when their social habits were most malleable. He argues that therefore, 9/11 impacted this generation much more than older generations, in turn leading to an increase in youth civic engagement.

To prove his point, Putnam points to voter turnout and polling data. In 2008, 51 percent of those under the age of 30 turned out to vote. This compares with a mere 36 percent youth turnout rate in 1996 and 40 percent in 2000.³ Furthermore, the number of college freshman who said that they had “discussed politics” in the past twelve months rose from 16 percent in 2000 to a record high of 36 percent in 2010 (Sandler & Putnam 2010, 11). Putnam explains that these variations are evidence of a societal change correlated with the 9/11 attacks.

In his paper, Putnam discusses youth vulnerability to political events as if it is a given, briefly mentioning that the 9/11 attacks affected Millennials more than other age-groups because they were most impressionable at the time. He then uses observations of

³ These numbers are based on Putnam’s calculations and differ slightly from the calculations derived from CIRCLE’s formula. See Chapter 3 for more on how voter turnout is calculated.

increased youth engagement to support his point. Elias Dinas' research on political learning (2013) lends support to Putnam's argument. Dinas uses Watergate as a case study for tracking youth sensitivity to political events. He shows that youth were more affected by the Watergate scandal than were older age groups. "For the young, prior preferences of Nixon were not as good a cue for their posterior preferences as for the old" (Dinas 2013, 11). While Putnam claims that Millennials were impacted by 9/11 in a way that changed their civic habits, Dinas uses the Nixon example to show that young people reacted to the Watergate scandal dissimilarly than older age groups, illustrating that youth process political events differently. Dinas also points to other empirical examples to build his argument that youth attitudes are more impressionable from political events, showing that his claim is valid across a broad range of scenarios. Thus, we can use Dinas' framework to bolster the premise of Putnam's 9/11 generational argument.

As evidence for his theory, Putnam uses several measurements to indicate increased political engagement among youth. While he only refers to these measurements broadly in *Still Bowling Alone*, he explicitly references them in *Bowling Together*. Putnam explains that he conducted a panel study during the summer and fall of 2000. He then returned to the study in October and November of 2001, following the 9/11 attacks. To measure trust in government, Putnam asked respondents, "How much can you trust the government in Washington to do what is right--all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or none of the time?" He found 51 percent of respondents had more trust in the federal government after the 9/11 attacks. He also found an increased level of social trust – a metric used to broadly describe trust in other people – and increased interest in public affairs, as well (Putnam 2002). If these indications of civic engagement are

sustained through 2004 and 2008, then Putnam's generational shift theory will be regarded more credibly.

While Putnam does a fairly good job explaining this generational shift in civic and societal engagement, he does not spend much time discussing other factors that may have played into the high youth turnout we saw in 2008. He writes, "Barack Obama ably surfed this wave of post-9/11 youthful civic engagement" (Sandler & Putnam 2010, 12). He then lists some of the other factors that may have influenced high youth engagement in 2008, but does not elaborate. I therefore found it necessary to explore the literature on these other factors that may have contributed to increased youth participation.

III. Candidate Preference

Several studies have pointed to intensity of candidate preference as an influential force driving voter turnout. In the case of Barack Obama, many believe that his youth, energy, and charisma made him an ideal candidate for young people. In January of 2008, *Time* reported that then-Senator Obama skipped an AARP engagement to attend a hip-hop event with Usher (Von Drehle 2008). It is clear that Obama made certain appeals to youth – like attending events with celebrities and speaking directly to young audiences – and they loved him for it. Discussing Obama's primary campaign, Von Drehle writes:

The youth appeal of Barack Obama was evident in the big crowds he drew as he campaigned across Iowa. There were a lot of fresh faces in those audiences, and many of them left wearing one of his extremely cool t-shirts. (Von Drehle 2008).

While not directly related to the youth vote, University of Washington social scientist Matt Barreto also studied the influence of individual candidate preference on voter turnout. A study was conducted on the 2000 presidential and 2001 Los Angeles

mayoral races. The findings for the mayoral race appear more salient, as they found that candidate preference had a significant impact on turnout. Specifically, Antonio Villaraigosa's presence in the race drove turnout among the Latino community, who the author argues had an affinity for him (Barreto et al. 2005, 72). The rationale behind this theory is that the Latino community strongly preferred Villaraigosa because they felt they could relate to him more, and that this strong preference drove turnout.

Similarly, in 2008, eligible black voters turned out and voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama. Turnout rate among blacks notably rose from 60.3 percent in 2004 to 65.2 percent in 2008 (Lopez & Taylor 2009, "Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History"). Like the Barreto study, the Lopez and Taylor study builds upon this idea of candidate appeal driving turnout.

While these findings are significant, there has been little research conducted on how intensity of candidate preference affected the youth vote in 2008. However, we can take these conceptual frameworks and apply them to the youth demographic, measuring how much higher youth turnout was in 2008 than in 2000, and how this correlated with youth preference for the candidate. The results will help build a stronger understanding of how candidate preference affected youth turnout.

IV. New Communication Technology

Advancements in communication technology offer politicians a unique outlet to target young voters. Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez qualitatively examine which techniques allowed the Obama campaign to translate online activity to offline actions in 2008. They found that the campaign tactfully used social media and the Internet to

disseminate information and build a geographically distributed virtual community (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez 2011, 200).

At campaign events, names, email addresses, and zip codes were collected. This allowed the campaign to catalogue their supporters' personal information and ask them to volunteer. The campaign website provided candidate information to Internet users, as well as a location to solicit donations. Then, a variety of social media websites were used to organize and outreach to voters. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr were used to provide news and organize voters (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez 2011, 201). These resources allowed the campaign to target its message to particular audiences, thus engaging people it may not have reached otherwise.

While Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez provide qualitative research on the Obama campaign's online strategy, Garcia-Castañon et al. conduct an empirical study to prove it. They start by explaining that online organizing has been a viable political strategy since the 2000 Democratic primary. The authors argue that simply having access to the Internet lowers the cost of obtaining political information, in turn leading to increases in voter turnout. Specifically, young people are better equipped to use the Internet for political purposes (Garcia-Castañon et al. 2011, 118). Given that the Millennial generation grew up learning to use computers since grade school, they are generally more adept than older generations. The premise of the article is that candidates who are effective with their online strategy will benefit in terms of voter turnout and vote share, especially from youth. The article however does not detract from the possibility that online organizing can have a significant impact on voting among older age groups. It simply focuses on

youth, operating under the assumption that young people are more likely to engage with online forms of contact.

In particular, the Garcia-Castañon study looks at data from the 2010 Collaborative Multiracial Political Study (CMPS 2010), where a telephone survey was conducted across multiple states and regions. Respondents were asked about specific online behaviors. Researchers then drew conclusions on how online behavior affected offline behavior in the 2008 presidential election, based on a sampling of 4,563 responses from individuals in 18 states. Among these voters aged 18-29, 67 percent had participated in at least one online political activity. In comparison, 32 percent of voters aged 50 or older participated in an online activity (Garcia-Castañon et al. 2011, 123). In this study, traditional indicators of political behavior – income, age, education, partisanship, and gender – were included as controls. Most importantly in building the context of this study, the authors found that using the Internet as a campaign information source clearly lends to an individual's propensity to vote (126). Furthermore, they showed that different types of online activity affected voter turnout in different ways. To highlight how demographic factors affected the study, data was stratified by race. However, among the different types of online activity, visiting a candidate's website yielded the most consistent results among all racial groups.

Finally, Tom P. Bakker and Claes H. de Vreese published a study in January of 2011 that compared the differential correlations of traditional and online media and youth voting. The authors conducted a national survey, interviewing 2,409 individuals, aged 16 to 24. They found that a number of Internet activities have a positive relationship with political participation, while the relationship between traditional voting is weak, although

still positive (Bakker and de Vreese 2011). This study helps build upon the framework suggesting young people are more influenced by online political strategies.

All three of these studies make a strong argument for the importance of online organizing in engaging and turning out the youth. The Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez study is important in understanding the specific techniques that were employed. However, the Garcia-Castañon and Bakker and de Vreese studies provide a strong empirical case for how these strategies made a difference in the election outcome. Given the Garcia-Castañon study looked at 18 states, the results were fairly conclusive: engaging in an online political activity lends to higher turnout and a greater propensity of that individual to vote for the candidate who engaged them. The Bakker and de Vreese report, a national study, helps confirm this.

V. Youth Contact

Many have marveled at the Obama campaign's mobilization strategy. As described in the preceding sections, the campaign used a variety of online techniques to win over young peoples' support and get them out to the polls. However, as James Crabtree describes, "Its real innovation, however, came not in its use of technology, but its adoption of old-fashioned techniques of community organizing" (Crabtree 2009, 80). It is no secret that the Obama campaign was very good at organizing voters, but to what extent did this affect turnout among young people?

In *Voter Mobilization and the Obama Victory*, Tracy Osborn et al. provide an explanation of the influence of turnout on Obama's victory. They describe how the Obama campaign, "created a national phone bank, stimulated local meet-ups, had an unprecedented individual-level fundraising effort, and had an extensive ground

organization for personal contacts” (Osborn et al. 2010, 212). Russell Dalton builds upon this argument of youth outreach, explaining that the Obama campaign made a deliberate effort to engage young people in its mobilizing strategy. For example, 3,600 young people were trained to work on the campaign as part of Obama for America’s (OFA) summer fellowship program (Dalton 2009, 189).

In the Osborn study, the researchers compared structural and mobilization components of turnout. Whereas structural turnout is what is expected based on demographic socioeconomic attributes, mobilization is the deviation from the expected and the actual. They found that for every 10 percent increase in turnout beyond the structural level, the Democratic share of the vote increases by 1 percent. In other words, increased turnout in 2008 contributed to Obama’s victory, but it was not the deciding factor (Osborn et al. 2010, 220). Osborn concluded that Obama benefited from mobilizing people to vote, but also from changing minds of people who were already planning to vote. She also says that the outcome of the 2000 election probably spurred a turnout of similar levels in 2008 (230).

In their widely reputed literature on voter mobilization, *Mobilization, Participation, and American Democracy*, Rosenstone and Hansen explain that there are personal costs and benefits associated with voting, but that politicians can also affect turnout by mobilizing individuals (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). The authors explain that factors affecting whether you are mobilized include: your social networks, party contact, and competitive elections. They explain that politicians are methodical in who they target for mobilization. Politicians tend to focus on groups that will provide the most benefit. Previously, many politicians believed that youth would not provide much benefit

and therefore youth contact was low. However, Barack Obama's campaign thought otherwise and made a deliberate effort to engage young people.

These voter contact theories are characteristically different from Putnam's 9/11 generational theory, which explains increased youth engagement by referencing the 9/11 attacks (Sandler & Putnam 2010, 10). The voter contact theories provide a mechanical argument for how youth were engaged, while the 9/11 theory is more conceptual. Nonetheless, while they differ in design, these arguments are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that the 9/11 experience formed a strong behavioral tendency among young people to vote, and that Barack Obama astutely navigated these societal changes in order to mobilize young people to vote. The empirical research I have conducted in this study serves to provide more basis for these hypotheses.

VI. Conclusion

Based on the literature, I expect that all four of these schools of thought can be used to explain why young people were more politically engaged in 2008. However, based on the literature, I find the mobilization theory most compelling. At the end of the day, if you are encouraged to vote, it seems logical that this would yield the most significant results. The Obama campaign made a deliberate effort to outreach to young people. Communication advancements and candidate preferences are also, of course, important in engaging youth, but probably to a lesser extent. Putnam's generational argument is interesting, but difficult to prove. It may be that Barack Obama experienced a perfect storm – a cultural shift in the youth's political interest, as well as the right team, the right tools, and the right persona to get the job done. My research seeks to explain the

extent of which each of these factors made a difference in the 2008 presidential election outcome.

3 Models of Youth Voter Turnout

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I present a model for testing the influence of three specific variables on youth voter turnout, the dependent variable. These independent variables are drawn from the academic works cited in the previous chapter, and are selected based on their prevalence in the literature on youth political engagement. Applying these variables to the research question, I have constructed three hypotheses:⁴

H₁: Experiencing 9/11 at a young age has led to increased political participation among youth.

H₂: The intensity at which youth preferred Barack Obama was very high, which led to an increase in political participation.

H₃: Barack Obama and the Democratic Party specifically targeted youth in their mobilization strategies, which led to an increase in political participation.

I test these hypotheses empirically by using data provided by the American National Election Studies (ANES). The ANES Time Series study has been conducted since 1948 and includes a wide range of survey questions that are designed to measure American voter trends. It is therefore a suitable source from which we can select variables that relate to the aforementioned hypotheses and run mean tabulations and regressions for different age cohorts and election years.

The primary cases this study focuses on are the 2000, 2004, and 2008 presidential elections. The year 2000 was selected because youth voter turnout was exceptionally low.

⁴ One of the theories discussed in the previous chapter is not included in this methods section. That theory – the new communication technology theory – is not included for a variety of reasons, but chiefly because there is not sufficient empirical data to make substantial claims about its causal relationship with voter turnout. Online political engagement is still a relatively new phenomenon and is therefore not included in the ANES Time Series database.

On the other side of the spectrum, 2008 was chosen because turnout was high among youth. I have also included 2004 because it is a presidential election and thus allows us to better monitor trends between 2000 and 2008. The strength of using 2000 and 2008 as primary case selections is that they are both open-seat presidential election years that witnessed varying turnout rates. However, a potential weakness to this selection is that Barack Obama, the first African American presidential candidate to make it to the general election, was a much more historically astounding candidate than George W. Bush. Therefore, it may be challenging to draw implications from this study that span beyond the case years I have selected. However, this differentiation between cases will help shed light on how youth react to a revolutionary candidate, like Obama, which H₂ specifically addresses.

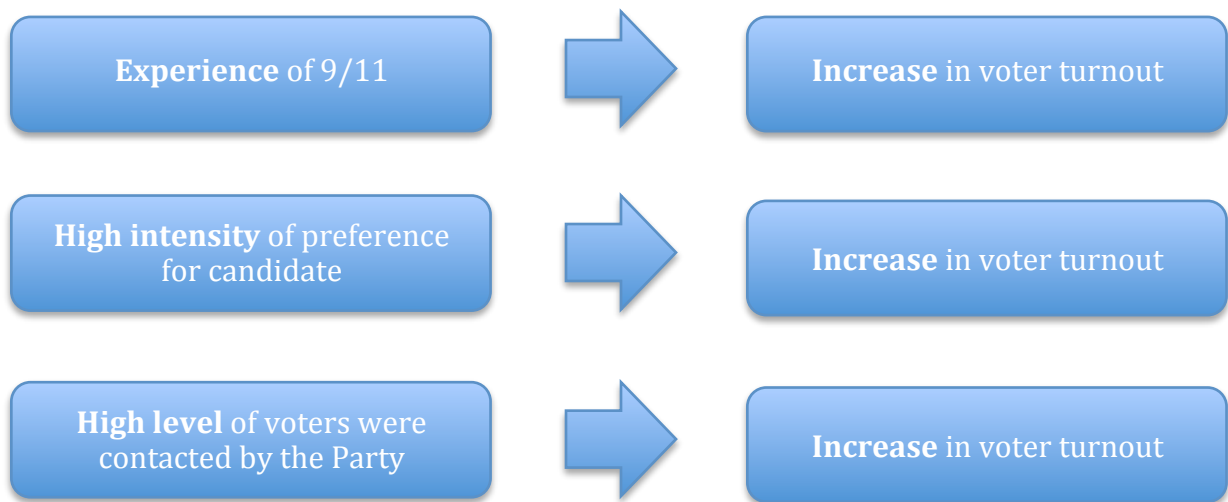
I have also included 1998 and 2002 as secondary cases for the purpose of providing more context to the 9/11 experience hypothesis and trends over time. Specifically, 1998 was selected to allow us to check whether our observations in 2000 are a part of a larger trend that began earlier. Due to our interest in the effect of the 9/11 attacks, 2002 was selected because of its proximity to September 11, 2001. Including this array of primary and secondary cases allows us to conduct a comparative analysis and observe trends over time. However, it is important to note that these secondary cases are midterm elections. Midterm elections are different from presidential elections in a number of ways. Most notably, turnout in midterm elections is almost always much lower than in presidential elections. Therefore, these years were included in this study not to emphasize differences in voter participation rates, but rather to broaden our window from which we are monitoring the variables related to the 9/11 experience.

In this study, I have stratified the respondents into different age groups. The 18-29 range is the youngest group, 30-44 is the lower middle-aged group, 45-64 is the upper middle-aged group, and 65 and older is the eldest group. Specifically, I selected these ranges because they are commonplace in exit poll surveys and in electoral academic literature. Stratifying by age groups allows us to determine whether the relationship between independent and dependent variables is the same for the population, or if it varies between different age groups. If there is indeed variance between age groups, we will be able to draw conclusions about political engagement that is specific to youth.

II. A Model of Youth Turnout Influencers

The dependent variable examined is voter turnout rates, specifically among youth. The independent variables are *the experience of 9/11*, *intensity of candidate preference*, and *voter contact*. The causal mechanisms through which these independent variables affect the dependent variable are modeled in Figure 3-1.

Figure 3-1 Causal Mechanisms of Voter Turnout



Whereas candidate preference intensity and voter contact are fairly straightforward variables, the 9/11 experience is not. Therefore, in order to measure 9/11's impact on young people, I turn to the metrics Robert Putnam used in his 2000-2001 study. Specifically, I consider social trust, trust in government, and interest in public affairs (Putnam 2002). An increase in any three of these from 2000 to 2004 or 2008 will indicate a linear correlation with voter turnout.

III. Calculating Voter Turnout

There are various schools of thought on how voter turnout is best calculated. There is no way to measure turnout among different demographics completely accurately. This is because demographics are not recorded at the polls. Instead, we must rely on exit polls and surveys. Generally, exit polls are less reliable than surveys. Therefore, I have chosen to use U.S. Census Bureau survey data to calculate voter turnout among different age cohorts. I specifically use the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) November Voting and Registration Supplement from 2000, 2004, and 2008. To calculate turnout rates, I use a method designed by Tufts University's Center for Information & Research On Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) (Hugo Lopez et al. 2005, 9-10). This method takes the number of self-reported voters in a given age group and divides it by the number of citizens in that age group who answered the survey question. The formula for this method is shown below.

$$\text{CIRCLE Voter Turnout} = \frac{\text{\# of self-reported voters in age group } X}{\text{\# of citizens in age group } X \text{ who answered the question}}$$

IV. Mean Tabulation

In Chapter IV of this thesis, I analyze tabulations of the primary independent variables outlined in Figure 3-1 and include graphs of the mean value for the independent variable, stratified by age cohort and election year. This allows us to track the levels of each primary independent variable over time, and examine how these variables correlate with the voter turnout rate. This facet of my analysis allows us to aggregately measure the correlation between these variables and voter turnout. An aggregate perspective is helpful for understanding overall trends. However, in order to control for demographic variables and understand how these variables affect turnout on an individualistic level, I also construct regression analyses.

V. Regression Analyses

Two regression analyses are included in this study. The first is a multivariate regression analysis with voter participation as the dependent variable. Independent variables include those listed previously in this chapter,⁵ as well as a secondary set of demographic variables that have been shown to have correlations with voter turnout. In 1980, Raymond Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone published *Who Votes?*, which included a comprehensive study of voting trends among different demographic groups. In the study, they showed that voting rates vary significantly among different demographic groups (Wolfinger 1980). Specifically, age, race, gender, education, and income have been known to correlate with voter turnout. The first regression analysis includes these variables alongside the primary set of independent variables. Including these secondary

⁵ The primary set of independent variables includes: social trust, trust in the federal government, interest in public affairs, feeling thermometer: Democratic presidential candidate, feeling thermometer: Republican presidential candidate, contact during campaign: Democratic Party, and contact during campaign: Republican Party.

variables in the regression analysis allows us to control for age, race, gender, education, and income when examining the primary set of variables.

The second regression analysis is designed to explore the types of young people that the Democratic and Republican parties contacted. Specifically, I run one multivariate regression for each political party, with the covariates: voter registration and partisanship. In this regression, Democratic and Republican voter contact are the dependent variables and voter registration and partisanship are the independent variables. Only the youngest age cohort – those aged 18 to 29 – is included in this analysis, in order to allow us to specifically understand the types of youth that parties have historically contacted. This regression analysis allows us to answer the question: *If a political party contacted a young person, was that young person more likely to be a registered voter and/or partisan?* These independent variables were selected because of their well-known correlation with voter turnout. If you are registered to vote, you are more likely to vote. Similarly, if you are very partisan, you are also more likely to vote.

VI. Research Design Limitations

The primary limitation of this research design is that there are a multitude of other potentially confounding variables that influence voter turnout (i.e., voter ID laws, voter's geographic location, accessibility of information on the candidate, proximity to a polling place, competitive elections, et cetera). To consider all of these variables independently would be virtually impossible. However, I have done my best to address possible confounding variables by including race, gender, education level, income level, and age in my analysis.

Another important limitation is that I rely on two separate data sources for voter turnout. For the primary variable tabulations, I refer to the Census data using CIRCLE's calculation methods. This data source and method is widely regarded as highly credible among many scholars. However, for the regression analyses, I use ANES self-reported voter participation data. The ANES data does not match the Census data. Whereas Census data for 18-29 year-olds presents an upward trend from 2000 to 2004 and from 2004 to 2008, ANES data illustrates an upward trend from 2000 to 2004, but a decrease in turnout between 2004 and 2008. This inconsistency skews the regression analyses results. However, there is no feasible method of merging these datasets, so I had no option but to use ANES self-reported turnout data for the regression analyses.

Finally, an important distinction in this type of research is between age-specific trends and generational trends. An age-specific perspective will illustrate voting behavior amongst youth in comparison with older voters. This is the type of trend the previous models described in this chapter examine. However, a generational approach considers whether youth voting trends in a given election year have strong implications on the voting behavior of those individuals over their lifespan. Many political scientists hold an expectation that youth vote in lower numbers, but that they will vote in higher numbers when they are older and take on adult roles in society (Wolfinger 1980, 56). However, what we see in 2008 is that youth have turned out in numbers higher than historical norms. Therefore, it is important to ask: *Is this a generational trend?* Since the ANES is a time series study, it is impossible to track the specific respondents over time. (This is only possible with panel data.) In order to address this shortcoming, one would have to add eight years to the original 2000 cohort. Using this method, known as *cohort analysis*,

one can compare self-reported voter turnout among the 18-29 cohort from 2008 with the 26-37 cohort from 2012 and 2016. The method is imperfect, but it works as an alternative when panel data is not available. However, the ANES data for 2012 has not yet been added to the cumulative data file, and due to time constraints and technical limitations, I was not able to merge the datasets.⁶ Furthermore, in order to truly understand the significance of voting trends in 2008 from a generational perspective, one would have to examine more than simply 2008 and 2012. It is therefore premature to make an assessment on whether the high youth voting we saw in 2008 is indicative of a generational shift.

⁶ For those interested in conducting cohort analyses, the ANES data files are located here: http://electionstudies.org/studypages/download/datacenter_all_datasets.php.

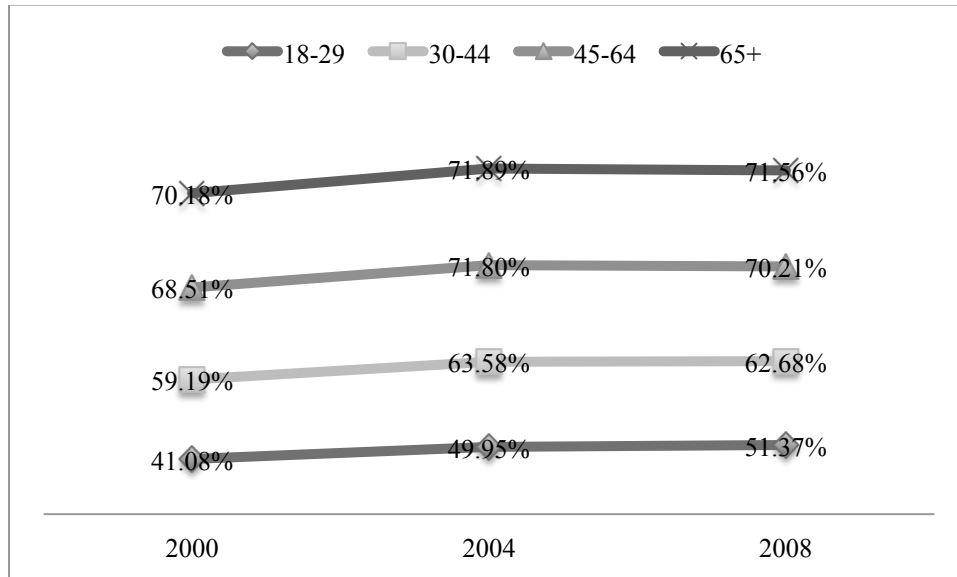
4 Analysis of Youth Turnout Models

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I use American National Election Studies (ANES) data to run two different types of analyses: mean tabulations and regression analyses. For the mean tabulations, I use the primary set of independent variables: *the 9/11 experience*, *intensity of candidate preference*, and *voter contact*. I isolate these independent variables by age cohorts and then analyze correlations with the dependent variable, voting rate. Since these graphs are constructed from mean scores, the results represent an aggregate of the outputs. The regression analyses present a more individualistic understanding of how these variables affect voter turnout. Other well known correlates of voter turnout – age, race, gender, education, and income – are also included as controls.

To contextualize this analysis, it is important to begin with an overview of voter turnout in 2000, 2004, and 2008. Figure 4-1 is constructed using data from the U.S. Census CPS November Voting and Registration Supplement.

Figure 4-1 Presidential Election Year Voter Turnout by Age, 2000-2008



This graph was constructed utilizing the U.S. Census, November Current Population Survey and CIRCLE's voter turnout formula

Voter turnout increased among all age groups from 2000 to 2004. This increase was most significant among the youngest age group, 18-29 year-olds, for which it increased 8.87 percent. The second youngest group, those aged 30-44, had the second most significant increase in voter turnout. In 2004, they turned out in 4.39 percent higher numbers than 2000. However, this group's turnout decreased from 2004 to 2008, while those aged 18-29 increased in turnout by 1.43 percent. Overall, those aged 18-29 turned out 10.29 percent higher in 2008 than in 2000. In the ensuing subsections, I explain how these changes in voter turnout correlate with the independent variables in question.

II. The 9/11 Experience Tabulations

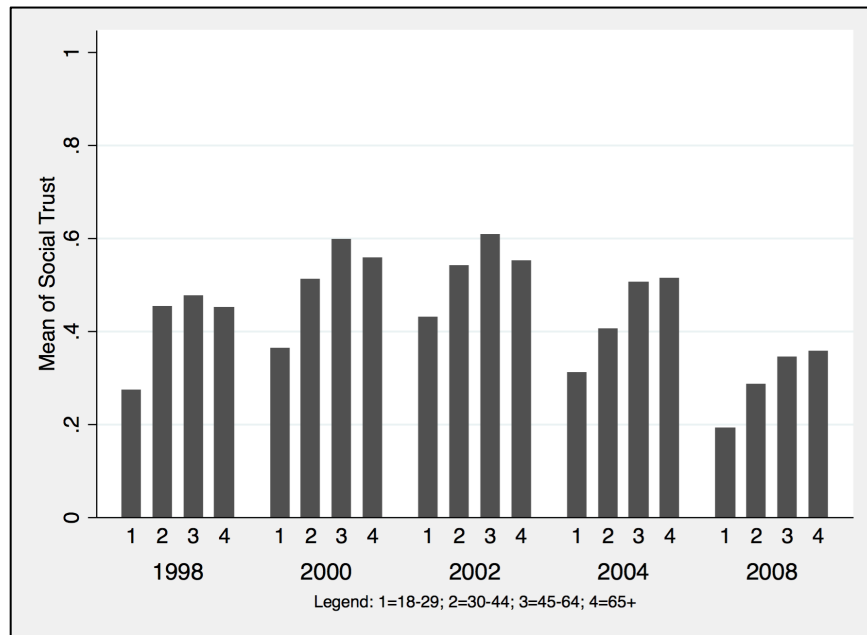
In this section, I explore and analyze the theory Robert Putnam used to explain increased civic engagement among young people post 9/11. I use the same variables Putnam used in his 2002 study – social trust, trust in the federal government, and interest in public affairs (Putnam 2002). I track these variables over the primary and secondary

case years outlined in the previous chapter of this paper, paying special attention to the pre and post-9/11 years, 2000 and 2002. I show that among all three variables, there was an increase in observations in 2002, but that these observations did not sustain into 2004 and 2008 and thus cannot be considered the driving force of youth voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election.

Social Trust

First, I examine levels of social trust over time. The American National Election Studies survey asks, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” (ANES 2011, 580). The respondents can then answer either: “Can’t be too careful” (coded as “0”), or “Most people can be trusted” (coded as “1”). Figure 4-2 illustrates the average response to this question among different age cohorts over time.

Figure 4-2 Mean of Social Trust

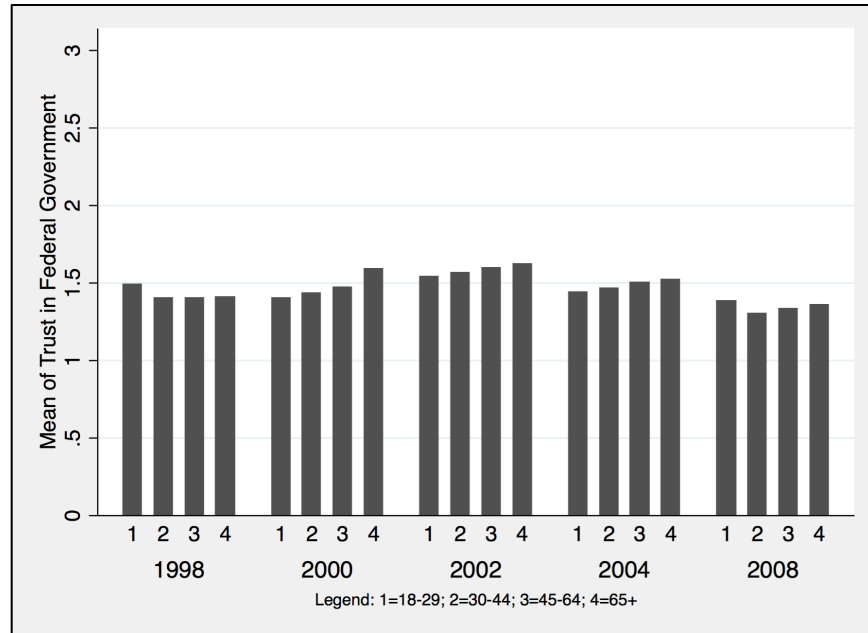


As depicted in Figure 4-2, we can see that social trust increased among young people aged 18-29 between 1998 and 2002, but then began to decline in 2004 and 2008. Similar trends exist among the other age cohorts. We can see how the increase in social trust between 2000 and 2002 may have led Putnam to believe that this was a salient issue that affected the increase in youth voter turnout. However, since this social trust was not sustained through 2004 and 2008, we can conclude that it probably was not the driving force of youth voting in 2008.

Trust in the Federal Government

Next, I move on to measuring levels of trust in government over time. For this variable, I use the ANES question, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” (ANES 2011, 560). To this question, respondents can answer: “None of the time” (coded as “0”), “Some of the time” (coded as “1”), “Most of the time” (coded as “2”), and “Just about always” (coded as “3”). Figure 4-3 illustrates these responses over time.

Figure 4-3 Mean of Trust in Federal Government



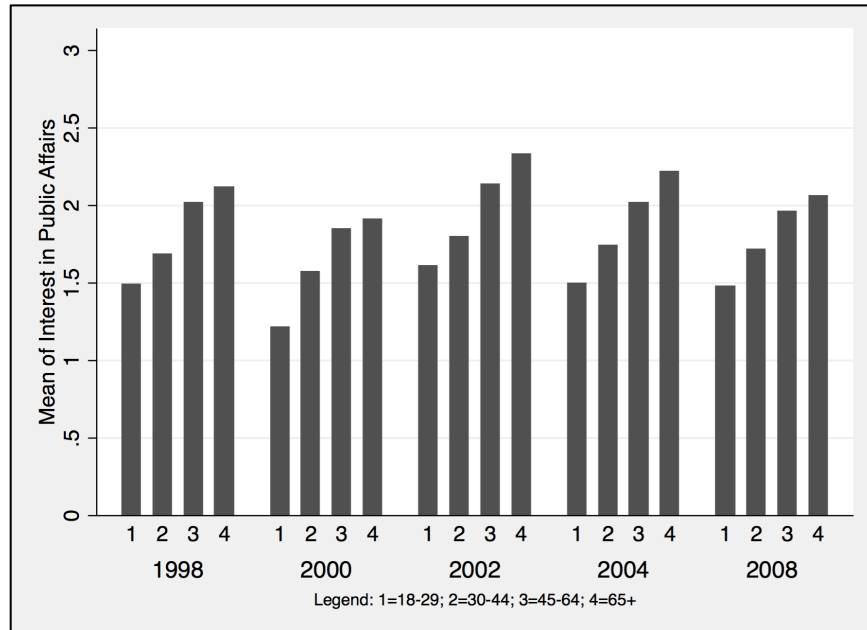
In Figure 4-3, a higher response indicates a higher level of trust in the federal government. What we see, however, is a lack of significant trends among young people, and other age groups as well. Between 1998 and 2000, trust in the federal government actually declined, although marginally. It then rose between 2000 and 2002 among all age cohorts. In *Bowling Together*, Putnam explains that this increase may partially be a response of increased patriotism and “rally around the flag” sentiment that the 9/11 attacks spurred (Putnam 2002). However, while Putnam seeks to use this variable to explain increased turnout in 2004 and 2008, the levels of trust in government actually declined in those years, which leads us to believe that his hypothesis may indeed be spurious.

Interest in Public Affairs

Wrapping up the set of 9/11 experience variables, we turn to interest in public affairs. The ANES survey asks, “Would you say you follow what's going on in

government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” (ANES 2011, 216). To this, respondents can reply: “Hardly at all” (coded as “0”), “Only now and then” (coded as “1”), “Some of the time” (coded as “2”), and “Most of the time” (coded as “3”). Figure 4-4 illustrates these responses over time.

Figure 4-4 Mean of Interest in Public Affairs



As depicted in Figure 4-4, we can see that the youth’s interest in public affairs actually declined between 1998 and 2000, but then increased by over a half-point between 2000 and 2002. It then dipped slightly in 2004 and remained steady in 2008. We can see that youth interest in public affairs had an overall increase between 2000 and 2008, although the 2008 levels are about equal to those in 1998. Given such, it is hard to draw conclusions from this variable. One interpretation is that 9/11 prompted increased interest in public affairs among young people. However, I would argue that this interpretation is shortsighted, as the levels of interest in public affairs in 2008 looked very similar to the levels in 1998.

Summary of 9/11 Experience Analysis

Overall, while levels of social trust, trust in government, and interest in public affairs increased among youth between 2000 and 2002, those increases were not sustained through 2004 and 2008. Therefore, we can conclude that while Putnam's theory can be used to explain youth civic engagement in 2002, it cannot be used to explain what drove increased turnout in 2004 and 2008. Therefore, we must turn to the remaining two theories in an attempt to explain this phenomenon.

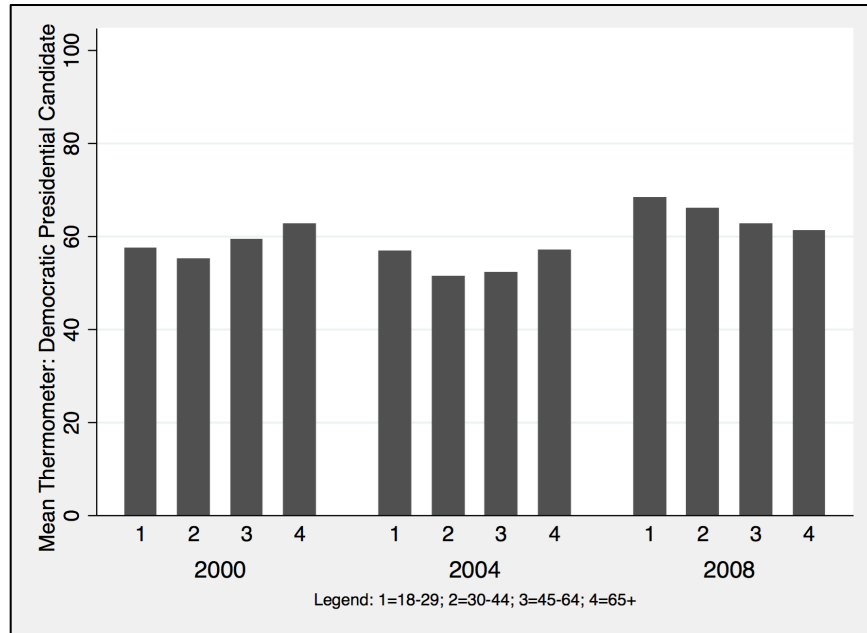
III. Candidate Preference Tabulations

Scholars (Von Drehle, Barreto, and Lopez and Taylor) believe that intensity of candidate preference plays a large role in motivating voter turnout. A great deal of the literature that discusses Barack Obama's youth appeal pertains to his candidate appeal – a young, charismatic, idealistic candidate. In this section, I use ANES feeling thermometer data to measure how favorably respondents felt toward Barack Obama and George W. Bush. The respondents were asked to rank their feelings about the Democratic and Republic presidential candidates on a scale from 0-100, whereas “0” represents the lowest level of likability and “100” represents the highest level (ANES 2011, 394). Since this theory specifically pertains to presidential elections, only the primary cases – 2000, 2004, and 2008 – are included.

Feeling Thermometer: Democratic Presidential Candidate

In Figure 4-5, the average Democratic presidential candidate likability is illustrated among different age cohorts over time.

Figure 4-5 Mean Feeling Thermometer: Democratic Presidential Candidate



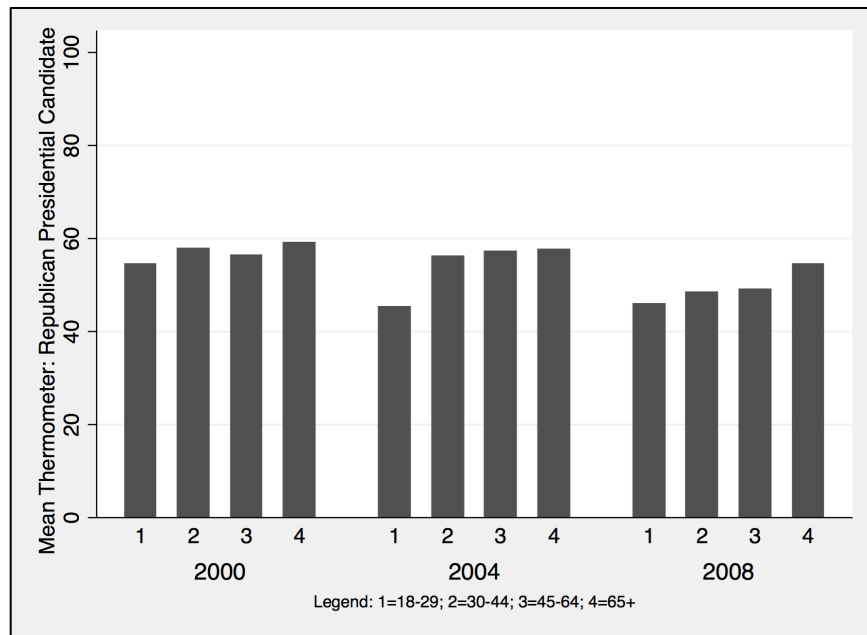
In 2000 and 2004 respectively, young people aged 18-29 modestly liked Al Gore and John Kerry. In 2000, youth had an average feeling thermometer score of “57.5” for Al Gore. They preferred John Kerry slightly less, with an average score of “56.8” in 2004. Likability of the Democratic presidential candidate shot up dramatically in 2008, when young people held an average score of “68.38” for Barack Obama. This was an 11.58-point increase from the 2004 average. Interestingly, the average score of the second youngest age cohort (those aged 30-44) increased at an even greater rate. In 2004, their average score was “51.28.” It climbed to “65.91” in 2008, a difference of “14.63.” It is difficult to explain why this age cohort had a starker score increase than the youngest cohort. One interpretation is that youth preferred Democratic candidates at higher rates in 2000 and 2004 than the second youngest cohort did. The increase in 2008 was thus a greater difference from the 2004 score for the second cohort, but the youngest cohort still had the highest average score for Barack Obama. Regardless, it is clear that youth greatly

avored Barack Obama, and therefore we can conclude that this likely had an impact on voter turnout.

Feeling Thermometer: Republican Presidential Candidate

Figure 4-6 depicts the average feeling thermometer scores for Republican presidential candidates among different age cohorts over time.

Figure 4-6 Mean Feeling Thermometer: Republican Presidential Candidate



The highest score the 18-29 year-old cohort cast for a Republican presidential candidate was an average of “54.48” in 2000. It then declined to about “45” points in 2004 and 2008. Between 2000 and 2008, likability dropped across the board, with a decline of “8.56” points for *cohort 1*, “9.40” points for *cohort 2*, “7.30” points for *cohort 3*, and “4.76” points for *cohort 4*. This can be explained by a variety of factors, but the most likely reason is that Americans viewed George W. Bush very unfavorably at the end of his term. Immediately before the 2008 presidential election, George W. Bush’s approval rating had dropped to 25 percent (Gallup 2008). These very unfavorable

numbers likely caused damage to the Republican Party's brand, and in effect resulted in across-the-board low likability scores for the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, John McCain.

Comparison of Democratic and Republic Presidential Candidate Feeling Thermometers

The most important distinction to note is that for all case years, the 18-29 cohort scores for Republican presidential candidates are lower than the scores they cast for Democratic presidential candidates. For example, the 18-29 cohort gave Al Gore a score of "57.50" in 2000, while they only gave George W. Bush a score of "54.50." Most strikingly, the youth cohort gave Barack Obama a score of "68.38," while they only gave John McCain a score of "45.92" in 2008, a difference of "22.46" points. This "22.46" Democratic advantage in 2008 is huge, and likely a driving factor in youth turnout at the polls. It is true that feeling thermometer scores were higher across all age cohorts for the Democratic candidate in 2008 than for the Republican candidate. Some of this can likely be attributed to the fact that young people generally tend to prefer Democratic candidates over Republican candidates. Even considering this, the youth feeling thermometer score was highest of all, which is why I argue that this had the greatest effect on turnout among young people.

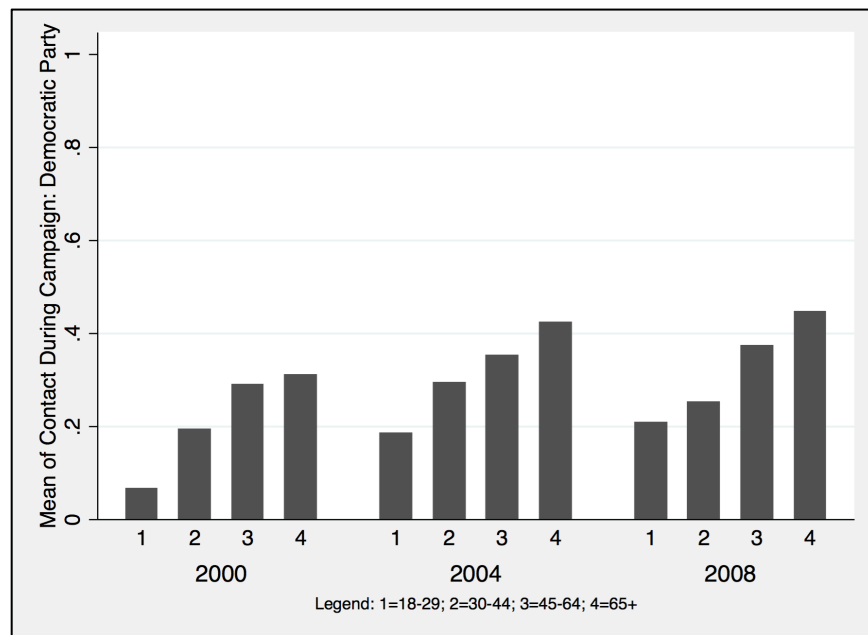
IV. Youth Contact Tabulations

Research shows that when voters are contacted by a campaign, they are more likely to turnout to vote. My research illustrates that the Democratic Party has become increasingly more successful in outreaching to youth. The Republican Party, on the other hand, has become increasingly less successful at reaching young people.

Contact During Campaign: Democratic Party

For the American National Election Studies, respondents were asked, “Did the Democratic Party contact you about the election or campaign?” (ANES 2011, 1034). To this, respondents can reply either “yes” or “no.” Figure 4-7 illustrates the responses to this question among different age cohorts and over time. A score of “0” indicates no contact, while a score of “1” indicates that the Democratic Party contacted them during the campaign.

Figure 4-7 Mean of Contact During Campaign: Democratic Party

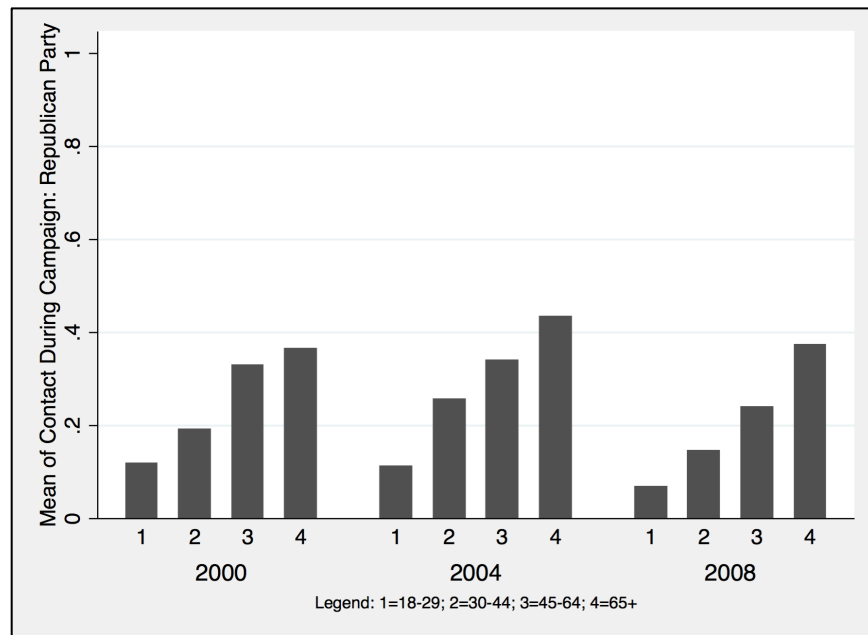


As depicted in Figure 4-7, Democratic contact was the lowest in 2000. The average score among the youngest cohort was only “0.07.” However, they improved in 2004 when the youth contact score climbed to “0.19” and peaked at “0.21” in 2008. Between 2000 and 2008, these scores actually increased among all age cohorts. This may mean that the Democratic Party is simply becoming better at making contact with people. Regardless, their increased contact likely paid off when it came to mobilizing people to get out and vote.

Contact During Campaign: Republican Party

Following the Democratic Party contact question, the ANES asks, “Did the Republican Party contact you about the election or campaign?” (ANES 2011, 1035). In Figure 4-8, “0” represents no contact and “1” represents contact was made. The average scores are shown among different age cohorts and over time.

Figure 4-8 Mean of Contact During Campaign: Republican Party



Republican youth contact stayed steady at about “0.12” in 2000 and 2004, and then declined by “0.07” in 2008. Similar patterns exist among the other age cohorts over time; contact levels were pretty steady in 2000 and 2004 and then declined across the board in 2008. We can see how these results correlate with election outcomes: when contact was higher, the Republican presidential candidate won. When it was lower in 2008, the Democratic presidential candidate was victorious.

Comparison of Democratic and Republican Contact

In comparing Democratic and Republican contact, it is first important to note that Republican contact started out higher than Democratic contact, and then shifted. In 2000, Republican contact among youth was recorded at “0.12,” while Democratic contact was “0.07.” Then, in 2004, Republican contact began to decrease while Democratic contact increased. Finally, in 2008, Democratic contact peaked at “0.21,” while Republican contact was a mere “0.07.” The outcomes of the elections correlate with voter contact. Similarly, when voter contact was highest among youth in 2008, voter turnout for this cohort had peaked at 51.37 percent.

V. Regression Analyses

Cumulative Regression Analysis

The first analysis in this subsection is a regression using the set of primary independent variables⁷ with voter participation as the dependent variable. Age, race, gender, education, and income are also included in this model as control variables, given that they have been identified as known correlates of voter turnout (Wolfinger 1980). The results are included in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1 Effect of Primary Variables and Well Known Predictors of Political Behavior on Voter Participation in Presidential Elections, 2000-2008

N = 2689, R² = 0.1927

Covariates	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Social Trust	0.0625651	0.0160941	*0	0.031007	0.0941233
Trust in Federal Government	0.0031778	0.012621	0.801	-0.0215701	0.0279257
Interest in Public Affairs	0.0933167	0.0083433	*0	0.0769568	0.1096766

⁷ Again, the primary set of independent variables includes: social trust, trust in the federal government, interest in public affairs, feeling thermometer: Democratic presidential candidate, feeling thermometer: Republican presidential candidate, contact during campaign: Democratic Party, and contact during campaign: Republican Party.

Running Head: WHY THEY VOTED

Feeling Thermometer: Democratic Presidential Candidate	-0.0000531	0.0003299	0.872	-0.0007001	0.0005938
Feeling Thermometer: Republican Presidential Candidate	-0.0003219	0.0003011	0.285	-0.0009122	0.0002685
Contact During Campaign: Democratic Party	0.0762653	0.0180507	*0	0.0408706	0.1116601
Contact During Campaign: Republican Party	0.0755691	0.0187257	*0	0.0388509	0.1122874
Year ⁸	0.0098292	0.010159	0.333	-0.0100911	0.0297495
Age	0.002102	0.0004927	*0	0.0011359	0.0030682
Race ⁹	0.0077715	0.0177325	0.661	-0.0269993	0.0425424
Gender	0.0534936	0.015213	*0	0.0236633	0.083324
Education Attainment: comparison is grade school or less					
Education Attainment: High School	0.1009224	0.0462894	*0.029	0.0101557	0.1916891
Education Attainment: Some College	0.1824292	0.0476591	*0	0.0889766	0.2758817
Education Attainment: College or Advanced Degree	0.2494104	0.0489888	*0	0.1533505	0.3454702
Income: comparison is with 0 to 16 th percentile					
Income: 17 th to 33 rd percentile	0.1006892	0.0243064	*0	0.0530278	0.1483505
Income: 34 th to 67 th percentile	0.1367115	0.0233928	*0	0.0908416	0.1825814
Income: 68 th to 95 th percentile	0.1583869	0.0257713	*0	0.1078531	0.2089207
Income: 96 th to 100 th percentile	0.1293174	0.0358103	*0	0.0590986	0.1995361
cons	0.1230664	0.0661175	0.063	-0.0065804	0.2527131

* $P < .05$

⁸ A positive coefficient for year would indicate higher turnout over time.

⁹ For this regression analysis, race is coded as "0" for white and "1" for non-white. The scholarship says that we should expect a decrease in voter participation among non-whites (Wolfinger 1980). However, for this particular regression model, race has a p-value of "0.661," which means that it is not statistically valid. However, if race is run as a bivariate regression with voter participation as the dependent variable, it is statistically significant and there is a negative relationship, as we would expect.

Among the primary set of independent variables in Table 4-1, only social trust, interest in public affairs, contact from the Democratic Party, and contact from the Republican Party are statistically significant (p-value is less than .05). Among these variables, interest in public affairs had the strongest statistical relationship with voter participation. The coefficient for interest in public affairs is “0.0933167,” which means that for each person who demonstrated a positive score for this variable, they would be 9.33 percent more likely to vote. Social trust had a coefficient of “0.0625651,” indicating that those who are socially trusting are 6.25 percent more likely to vote. Finally, those contacted by the Democratic or Republican parties both had a coefficient around “0.07.” This means that those contacted by either of the parties are about 7 percent more likely to vote.

Among the control group of well known voting correlates, education attainment¹⁰ and income level¹¹ held the strongest relationships. Those who completed a higher level of education were more likely to vote, with those who have an undergraduate or advanced college degree 24.94 percent more likely to turn out. Income was also very salient, although the coefficients were slightly lower than education in comparison. Interestingly, those in the 68th to 95th percentile were 15.83 percent more likely to vote, while the highest percentile – 96th to 100th – were 12.93 percent more likely to vote. It is difficult to ascertain why the wealthiest percentile had a lower coefficient than the second wealthiest percentile, but perhaps controlling for education affected this. Gender was also

¹⁰ Education attainment is split into different levels, which allows us to measure how each benchmark correlates with voter participation. “Grade school or less” is used as the comparison.

¹¹ In the ANES Times Series Study, income is stratified by percentile tiers with the 0 to 16th percentile as the comparison. However, it must be noted that income was self-reported in the ANES Times Series study, therefore the accuracy of each percentile tier is questionable.

statistically significant, with females 5.34 percent more likely to vote than males. Finally, age was statistically significant, with individuals 0.21 percent more likely to vote with each year older they became. However, in this particular model, year and race were not statistically significant variables.

Voter Contact Regression Analyses

The next set of regression analyses were designed to test the types of people that the Democratic and Republican parties were more likely to contact. In Table 4-2, voter registration status and party ID are included as covariates to voter contact, the dependent variable. Each of the covariates is coded on a “0-1 spectrum,” whereas “0” indicates not registered and not partisan and “1” indicates registered and partisan. Only those from the 18-29 year-old cohort were included in these analyses.

Table 4-2 Effect of Voter Registration Status and Partisanship on Democratic Party Contact of 18-29 Year-Old Individuals During Campaign in Presidential Elections, 2000-2008

N = 671, R² = 0.0293

Covariates	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Registered to Vote	0.109183	0.0367742	*0.003	0.0369761	0.1813899
Party ID	0.0962416	0.0305055	*0.002	0.0363433	0.1561398
_cons	0.0209816	0.0376478	0.578	-0.0529407	0.0949038

**P<.05*

In Table 4-2, we can see that both covariates were statistically significant. Voter registration had the strongest correlation, with registered individuals being 10.91 percent more likely to be contacted by the Democratic Party. Partisan individuals were 9.62 percent more likely to be contacted.

In the second regression analysis, the same covariates were run with contact from the Republican Party as the dependent variable. Coding remained the same and results

were specifically drawn from the 18-29 year-old cohort, only. Results are included in Table 4-3.

Table 4-3 Effect of Voter Registration Status and Partisanship on Republican Party Contact of 18-29 Year-Old Individuals During Campaign in Presidential Elections, 2000-2008

N = 671, R² = 0.0041

Covariates	Coef.	Std. Err.	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Registered to Vote	0.0487112	0.0297262	0.102	-0.009657	0.1070793
Party ID	-0.0086932	0.024659	0.725	-0.0571117	0.0397254
cons	0.0676616	0.0304324	0.027	0.0079068	0.1274163

**P<.05*

Unfortunately, neither of these covariates were statistically significant, as they both had p-values of above the “0.05” threshold. Therefore, we cannot draw conclusions from this regression analysis.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the aggregate correlation between the 9/11 experience and youth voter turnout appears minimal at best. However, I have shown that intensity of candidate preference and voter contact appear to have a strong relationship with voter turnout. This is evident both from the aggregate perspective we garnered from the mean tabulations and the individualist approach of regression analyses. Furthermore, among youth, those who were partisan and registered to vote were more likely to be contacted by the Democratic Party. The regression results for Republican Party contact were not statistically significant and therefore cannot be included in this analysis.

5 Findings, Limitations, and Implications

I. Findings

In this study, I set out to determine why the youth turned out in high numbers in the 2008 presidential election. After an extensive overview of the academic works surrounding this topic, I selected three primary variables to test: the impact of the 9/11 attacks, intensity of candidate preference, and voter contact. I relied upon the American National Election Study Times Series survey data to test these variables because of its comprehensive question set and continuity over time. Ultimately, I found that both intensity of candidate preference and voter contact were salient variables among young people, while the 9/11 experience was not very significant.

Putnam's theory held true for the mean tabulations I ran in 2000 and 2002. Social trust was up, trust in the federal government was up, and more people were interested in public affairs. However, the average scores for these variables decreased in 2004 and 2008. Even though these scores were not sustained, it is still possible that the experience of 9/11 contributed to this generation's political learning and in turn affected voter turnout. The aggregate levels of social trust, trust in the federal government, and interest in public affairs increased between 2000 and 2002. One could interpret this data to mean that while not sustained, the 9/11 experience variables did contribute to political learning. One could argue that the learning itself was sustained, contributing to higher participation rates in 2004 and 2008. Since voting rates among youth were significantly higher in 2004 than in 2000, this also feeds into the argument, and detracts from the Barack Obama-

specific argument that candidate preference and voter contact drove turnout. However, further research could explore this mechanism.

The second variable, intensity of candidate preference, aligned much more closely with voter turnout trends. Youth had lower Democratic candidate feeling thermometer scores in the 2000 and 2004 elections, which corresponded with a lower turnout. Then, in 2008, the youth score for Barack Obama increased significantly. Scores for the Republican candidates dropped between 2000 and 2004 and remained low in 2008. We can therefore postulate that this variable – candidate preference intensity – had a significant correlation with youth voter turnout. However, while voting rates and intensity of candidate preference of Barack Obama correlated, the increase in voting rates among youth between 2000 and 2004 creates some concerns with the salience of candidate preference as a correlate of youth voting. Youth voted 8.87 percent higher in 2004 than in 2000, while the Democratic presidential candidate preference hovered between 56 percent and 57 percent. The difference in youth voting between 2004 and 2008 was only a 1.43 percent increase. Considering how much higher youth Democratic presidential candidate preference was in 2008 than in 2004, we would assume a much higher youth participation rate. Furthermore, the Republican candidate preference score actually declined between 2000 and 2004 by nearly nine points. If our causal model states that stronger candidate preference yields higher turnout, then we would expect a negative voting trend among youth, which was not the case. From the mean tabulations, we could argue this invalidates the earlier claim – that candidate preference drove turnout – or we could interpret this to mean that other correlates demonstrated a stronger relationship with voter turnout. Unfortunately, the candidate preference variables did not yield

statistically significant results in the regression analyses, so we cannot make definitive causal claims about voter preference and youth turnout.

Finally, I tabulated mean scores for Democratic and Republican Party campaign contact. The average number of youth contacts from the Democratic Party increased over time. Conversely, Republican contacts decreased from 2000 to 2008. The higher number of contacts made by the Democratic Party in 2008 correlate with youth turnout rates. We can therefore conclude that this variable is also correlated to the high youth voter turnout we saw in 2008.

II. Limitations

In order to strengthen the validity of my findings, I controlled for age, race, gender, education, and income. However, there are still a number of other potentially confounding variables that influence voter turnout. While I considered the variables that were discussed most in youth civic engagement literature, there are other variables that likely contributed to turnout that this study does not address. Additionally, while the literature on voter contact specifically focuses on a candidate's campaign outreach to voters, this variable was not available in the ANES database. Instead, I used political party contact, which is similar, but not the same as contact coming from a candidate's campaign. Future studies should include survey data that measures a campaign's voter contact.

While Chapter II discusses the impact of communication technologies, I was not able to empirically test this variable. Since this technology is so new, the ANES database does not contain questions pertaining to it. Youth tend to be much more technology-savvy, as they grew up using computers and mobile devices. It is likely that the Obama

campaign's use of technology contributed to voter turnout, but I was simply unable to measure this. Future studies should seek to empirically measure the impact of online political strategy and new communication technologies.

Third, this study has a limited scope of case years examined. While 2000 was a year of low youth voting rates and 2008 a year of high voting rates, a more comprehensive study would include other important high points and low points. For example, a more comprehensive study would also include 1972, when 55.4 percent of youth historically turned out and elected Richard Nixon. Additionally, the 1992 election when Bill Clinton defeated incumbent George H.W. Bush also saw a high youth voting rate of 52 percent. In contrast, 1996 was a historical low point, when only 39.6 percent of youth turned out to reelect Bill Clinton. Including these case years in future studies would paint a more expansive picture of the factors that contribute to youth political participation.

Finally, it is not within the parameters of this study to distinguish between generational and youth-specific voting trends. Are the "Millennials" different from past generations? Are they truly more politically engaged? While many pundits are quick to respond, "yes," it is simply too soon to make generational claims about "Millennial" voting rates. This generation is still young and it would be premature to make an argument about the long term voting habits of today's young people.

III. Implications

Given the results of this study, it is unclear whether we have witnessed a generational shift that implies sustained youth voting, or whether high turnout was simply an anomaly limited to Barack Obama's candidacy. However, what we can conclude is

that candidate preference and voter contact both correlated with high voter turnout that we witnessed among youth in 2008. For candidates hoping to learn from the Obama campaign, it is important to apply these lessons. Candidates should try to make their brand appeal to youth by speaking at youth-oriented events, discussing youth-specific issues, and engaging in dialogue with young people. They should also construct a strong campaign infrastructure and work with the Democratic or Republican Party to ensure that youth are directly contacted in their outreach efforts. Such practices will likely yield increased voter turnout and vote share.

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