Quick Facts about Young Voters: 2006

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This year’s elections follow a presidential election that witnessed the highest level of national youth voter participation in over a decade, and a voter turnout rate among 18 to 29 year olds of 47 percent, up 9 percentage points over 2000. Whether the national voter mobilization momentum of 2004 continues into 2006 remains unpredictable. However, it would be a mistake to compare either state-level or national youth voter turnout in 2006 to 2004 since presidential elections generally draw more voters to the polls, and hence have higher voter turnout rates. Instead, the two appropriate comparisons are 2002, the last time midterm elections occurred, and 1994, the last time midterm elections followed a surge in youth voting in a presidential election (1992).

This fact sheet reports the characteristics of young voters nationally, including estimates of the number of young voters, voter turnout in 2002 and 1994 for various sub-groups of young people, and estimates of young voter partisanship in 2002 and 2006.

Overall, the general trend in the voter turnout rate nationally among young people during midterm elections was down between 1982 and 2002, as shown in Graph 1. This general decline in youth voter participation in midterm election years, however, masks variation in youth voter turnout rates across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In 2002, the three states with the highest level of youth voter turnout were Minnesota (45 percent), South Dakota (36 percent), and Alaska (34 percent). In contrast, the three states with the lowest voter turnout rates among young people in 2002 were Delaware (15 percent), West Virginia (15 percent) and Arizona (14 percent). It is likely that differences in electoral participation among young people across states was driven by high profile gubernatorial and Senate races and state wide initiatives in midterm years. In 2006, these factors again may help drive young people to the polls.

Graph 1: Voter Turnout Midterm Years Among Citizens, by Age

Estimates of Eligible Young Voters, 2006

In 2006, a midterm election year, there are an estimated 41.9 million young people between the ages of 18 and 29 who are eligible to vote in U.S. elections. Table 1 shows voting statistics for the years 2002, the last midterm election year, and 1994, the last midterm election year that followed a surge in youth voting in a presidential election year (1992). Note that the number of votes cast by young people in 1994 exceeded the number of votes cast by young people in 2002 by 1.5 million. In 1994, young people represented a greater share of voters than in 2002, and had a higher voter turnout rate than young people in 2002.

Voter Turnout Rates in 2002 and 1994 Among Young Citizens

Table 2 displays voter turnout rates for various groups of young people in 2002 and 1994. In many cases, voter turnout rates were higher in 1994 than in 2002, with the largest declines in voter turnout occurring for Asian non-Hispanic youth, Native American non-Hispanic youth, youth in the West, and youth with at least some college experience. For each of these groups, voter turnout rates declined by at least six percentage points between 1994 and 2002.
Partisanship Among Young People

In a new CIRCLE survey conducted in the early summer of 2006, young people were more likely to identify as an Independent and less likely to identify as a Republican than their adult counterparts. While young people today are more likely to identify as Democrats and Independents, there was little change in self-reported partisanship among young people between 2002 and 2006. (See Table 3.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006 18 to 29 Year Olds</th>
<th>Adults 30 and Older</th>
<th>2002 18 to 29 Year Olds</th>
<th>Adults 30 and Older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>29 percent</td>
<td>33 percent</td>
<td>26 percent</td>
<td>36 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent who leans Democrat</td>
<td>16 percent</td>
<td>13 percent</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
<td>12 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent (no leaning)</td>
<td>26 percent</td>
<td>18 percent</td>
<td>24 percent</td>
<td>15 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent who leans Republican</td>
<td>8 percent</td>
<td>9 percent</td>
<td>9 percent</td>
<td>10 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
<td>26 percent</td>
<td>21 percent</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's Tabulations from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey. Margin of error for 2006 is ± 3.5 percentage points. The margin of error for 2002 is ± 2.0 percentage points.

Notes

1 I thank Jared Sagoff for excellent research assistance. I also thank Peter Levine, Karlo Barrios Marcelo, Deborah Both, Abby Kiesa, and Emily Kirby for comments of previous drafts of this fact sheet.


3 For a full discussion of the different ways voter turnout can be calculated please see “CIRCLE Working Paper 35: The Youth Voter 2004: With a Historical Look at Youth Voting Patterns 1972-2004.” All voter turnout estimates presented in this fact sheet are calculated for U.S. citizens only, and according to the “Census Citizen Method” described in CIRCLE Working Paper 35.

4 We have defined racial/ethnic groups in the Current Population Survey November Supplements by defining anyone with Hispanic background as Latino; individuals who cite a single race or ethnicity and who are non-Hispanic as white, African American, Asian American or Native American. All programs used to generate race and ethnicity variables are available from the authors upon request.