

## Courting the Youth Vote in 2008: The Obama Effect

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**This paper examines a few of the numerous factors that may have led to increased youth turnout in the 2008 Election. First, theories of voter behavior and turnout are related to courting the youth vote. Several variables that are perceived to affect youth turnout such as party polarization, perceived candidate difference, voter registration, effective campaigning and mobilization, and use of the internet, are examined. Over the past 40 years, presidential elections have failed to engage the majority of young citizens (ages 18-29) to the point that they became inclined to not participate. This trend of low youth voter turnout began to reverse starting in 2000 Election and the youth turnout reached its peak in 2008. While both short and long-term factors played a significant role in recent elections, high turnout among youth voters in 2008 can be largely attributed to the Obama candidacy and campaign, which mobilized young citizens in unprecedented ways.**

The youth population is frequently the most underrepresented group in the American Electorate. Every four years, despite hopes of youth activists, this demographic continues to disappoint, allowing older generations to make up a disproportionately large amount of the electorate. Prior to November of 2008, turnout among eligible voters aged 18-24 had not exceeded 50% since 1972 in comparison to participation among the general electorate, which typically exceeds 60%. (CIRCLE, 2008). The lack of political engagement among young citizens can be attributed to a variety of factors such as a lack of political knowledge or efficacy, a lack of interest in politics, and the failure of the candidates to effectively engage the youth.

By 1996, some researchers suggested that “the youth do not view voting as a civic duty, do not see politics as personally relevant, do not identify with political parties, do not like the candidates, and use work as school as excuses” to avoid voting (Bystrom, 2007). Finally, after years of discouraging results, youth turnout rates increased significantly across the country in the 2004 Presidential Election (CIRCLE 2004), and the data from 2008 shows substantial youth participation and a reversal of generations of political apathy. In January of 2008, Time Magazine declared 2008 “The Year of the Youth Vote” and judging by the results of the 2008 Presidential Election, they appear to have been correct. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) estimates that about 23 million young voters participated in the 2008 Election, an increase of at least four to five percentage points from 2004 (CIRCLE, 2008). The numbers in 2008 are equiva-

lent to about 52-53% of eligible youth. According to Heather Smith, the Executive Director of *Rock the Vote*, “Young voters have dispelled the notion of an apathetic generation and proved the pundits, reporters and political parties wrong by voting in record numbers”(Borenstein, 2008). This significant turn of events begs the question, what made the youth turnout in record numbers in 2008?

Increased youth turnout can be credited to a variety of factors surrounding the 2008 Election. The increased civic and political activism of the millennial generation is the result of registration and mobilization activities sponsored by both partisan and non-partisan organizations, campaign tactics that targeted young voters, and even the historic candidacy of President Barack Obama. The assertion that Barack Obama inspired young citizens to vote appears to be backed by the fact that the youth favored the Democratic candidate, Obama over John McCain, by more than a 2:1 ratio. In this paper, I will use a variety of scholarly and popular sources to examine why the youth turned out to vote on November 4th, 2008. I will begin by examining different theories of voting behavior and turnout. Next, I will use these theories to explain the different factors that may have produced high turnout in 2008. Additionally, I will analyze why Barack Obama’s candidacy and campaign were so effective in mobilizing the youth vote. While there is little conclusive data about why the youth turned out in such high levels, the results seem to indicate that Barack Obama and his remarkable campaign organization played a significant role in motivating young citizens to get out the vote.

## Theories of Voter Behavior and Turnout

In order to understand why the youth turned out to vote, it is first essential to examine theories of voter behavior that shape political engagement and determine why people vote. The structure of American political parties is crucial to understanding voter behavior and turnout because the parties represent the primary vehicle of political expression in the United States. Anthony Downs' "An Economic Theory of Democracy" describes voting behavior in terms of rationality. All issues are aligned along a liberal-conservative spectrum and parties compete for the median voter. Citizens make rational decisions to vote for the candidate with views closest to them on the spectrum. Most importantly, citizens will only turnout to vote only when the perceived benefits of voting outweigh the costs (Downs, 1957). Unfortunately, especially for youth voters, the costs to vote may be larger than the rest of the electorate. Eric Plutzer's "Developmental Theory of Voter Turnout" states:

As young citizens confront their first election, all of the costs of voting are magnified: they have never gone through the process of registration, may not know the location of their polling place, and may not have yet developed an understanding of party differences and key issues. Moreover, their peer group consists almost entirely of other nonvoters: their friends cannot assure them that voting has been easy, enjoyable, or satisfying (Plutzer, 2002)

Prior to participating in their first election many youth may not identify strongly with one party or the other. Party identification is usually inherited from one's parents and may not be well understood or deeply ingrained, especially if parents are only weakly aligned with a party. Additionally, because the young do not often vote and usually have few resources to contribute to a campaign it is not in the party's rational interest to appeal to youth voters. Consequently, campaigns and interest groups devote little time and effort to courting youth voters.

One problem with Downs' theory is that it fails to take in to account what Donald Stokes in "Spatial Models on Party Competition" calls "valence issues" (Stokes, 1963). Valence issues are the types of issues that involve "the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued with the electorate" (Stokes, 1963). According to Stokes, the political parties are perceived and

evaluated on several dimensions, not just along a liberal-conservative spectrum. The dimensions that are most salient to the electorate may change over time (Stokes, 1963). Candidates running for office are most successful if they are able to predict which issues will be most important in the upcoming election and address those issues in accordance with public opinion. Citizens will turn out to vote if they believe election will impact these critical issues. The salience of issues may also vary across the electorate and certain issues, such as college tuition and the environment, may be more critical to youth voters than the electorate as whole.

More recent theories on voter behavior take account for factors other than ideology and issues in predicting voter turnout. According to Jason Timpone in his essay on "Structure, Behavior, and Voter Turnout in the United States", the structural barrier of voter registration plays a significant role in electoral behavior (Timpone, 1998). Most models of turnout behavior fail to acknowledge that voting is a two-stage process that includes both registering to vote, and then actually turning out to cast a ballot. Models that do not recognize the primary obstacle of voter registration cannot take in to account that some people, for instance young voters, who are less likely to vote in general, may become more likely to vote in subsequent elections after they become registered (Timpone, 1998).

Additionally, Timpone distinguishes between short and long-term factors that contribute to voter turnout. Partisanship, strength of party identification, external political efficacy, internal political efficacy, and trust in the government are classified as long-term predispositions that may be slightly responsive to election specifics but are relatively stable indicators of turnout. Short-term factors include election-specific attitudes concerning the perceived difference between the two candidates and whether or not they are viewed favorably. Long-term factors are more closely related to registration whereas the short-term election-specific attitudes have a stronger influence on turnout.

The results from Timpone's study conclude "the single most influential force in bringing recent registrants to the polls is the perceived candidate difference" (Timpone, 1998). Differences between the two candidates are crucial determinants of both registration and voting. In accordance with Downs' theory on rational voter behavior, Timpone's study shows "the greater the perceived difference between the candidates in the election, the greater are the benefits—instrumental and/or expressive—

of participation” (Timpone, 1998). Therefore, as the parties and candidates they nominate become increasingly polarized and ideologically distinct, the more citizens are inclined to vote.

While the previously mentioned theories on voter behavior are extremely important, they all lack one critical aspect of political competitions, the campaign. Campaigns may not change partisan preferences and how people vote but they do significantly affect voter mobilization and who votes. Daron R. Shaw, in his book *The Race to 270*, states that “campaigns are more about mobilization than they are about persuasion”, “political information and candidate perceptions are influenced by campaign activities”, and “events of the campaign both mobilize and persuade voters”(Shaw, 39). A later study, also co-authored by Daron Shaw, states that election events could “reduce the costs of registration and increase the perceived benefits in several ways”. (Gimpel et al., 2007). Election related stimuli such as campaign events are critical to informing and motivating the ‘peripheral’ electorate that may not typically turn out to vote (Gimpel et al., 2007). Election stimuli and campaign events are especially important to mobilize youth voters who have not yet overcome the initial costs of voter turnout and may need encouragement.

## Research Design and Methods

This study will analyze the different reasons the youth voted in 2008 by examining important theories of voter behavior and how they relate to the environment surrounding the 2008 presidential election. It is important to recognize that few studies have been conducted on voter turnout and stimulation in the 2008 so predictions are based on data and projections from past elections, or on popular news articles. Most of the information relevant to 2008 is taken from recent Gallup Poll data. Factors that will be examined include differences between the candidates, the salient issues emphasized in the 2008 election, voter registration efforts, the roll of campaign organizations, and the use of the Internet as a campaign tool and political resource.

## Results and Analysis

### *Candidate Ideology*

Ideally, voter turnout should increase as the perceived and real differences between the two

candidates become larger. The more the candidates diverge, the more the benefits of voting begin to outweigh the costs because one of the candidates becomes increasingly less similar to the individual voter. Morris Fiorina, author of *Culture War*, cites that although the American electorate is not necessarily divided, the politicians and the political choices we are given have become more polarized over the past several decades (Fiorina, 9). As a result, the American electorate is often forced to choose between two extremes and the stakes of the election are higher.

One reason that the 2008 election was so important to the youth was the large perceived differences (both ideologically and appearance based) between the two candidates. On one hand there was the Republican Senior Senator John McCain, a fairly conservative white male war veteran, who if elected, would have been the oldest president inaugurated. On the other side there was the liberal Democrat Barack Obama, a junior African-American Senator from Illinois. Not only did the two candidates appear very different, electing one candidate rather than the other could produce vast differences in regards to tax, environmental, health, foreign, and social policies. A Gallup poll conducted on Election Day in 2008 found that 92% of registered voters agreed that the stakes in this presidential election are higher than in previous years and 76% strongly agreed. The percentage of citizens who strongly agreed exceeds the percentage that said this about the 2004 election, and is more than twice what Gallup measured for the 1996 election (Gallup, 2008). When citizens perceive an Election as more important, they are more likely to turnout and vote. John McCain’s appointment of the extremely conservative Sarah Palin as his running mate may have also further contributed to perceptions of ideological differences between the two parties and their candidates. The 2008 election-specific factor of appearance differences and perceived ideological differences between Obama and McCain may have been a driving force in voter turnout among the general electorate, and especially among the peripheral youth voters.

### *Salient Issues in 2008*

Donald Stokes’ theory about valence issues tells us that elections are most likely to engage voters if they are able to supersede issues based purely on ideology and address the issues that most everyone feels negatively or positively about

(Stokes, 1963). According to Gallup poll data from October of 2008 Americans in the general electorate respectively ranked the economy, the federal budget deficit, terrorism, energy/gas prices, the situation in Iraq, healthcare, and taxes as extremely important issues in the 2008 presidential election. The economy consistently trumped other issues as most important (Gallup, 2008). Interestingly the issues most influential among the youth did not differ significantly from the general electorate. When asked to name the single most important issue affecting their vote for president this year, 18- to 29-year-old registered voters most often cited the economy, the war in Iraq, healthcare, energy and gas prices, and international issues (Gallup, 2008). Therefore, many citizens who were worried about these fundamental issues were likely to turn out if they perceived one candidate significantly more able than the other regardless of partisanship or ideology.

With the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression striking just a few months before the general election, the economy was inevitably the most salient issue that influenced both the youth and the general electorate to vote in 2008. Young citizens who are concerned about future jobs and housing markets are especially worried about the economic recession, which could affect their ability to afford college and find a stable occupation and source of income. Despite John McCain's experience, his association with the previous Republican administration, which is perceived by many citizens to have led the United States into this crisis, put him on the wrong side of a salient issue and may have cost him a significant amount of votes both among the youth and the general electorate. Contrastingly, although Obama lacks significant economic experience, his candidacy focused on a message of change that resonated with the electorate in a time of great crisis. The perceived difference in a candidate's ability to handle serious issues is one of the fundamental factors that brought the youth to the polls.

### *Voter Registration*

Unlike almost every other Western Democracy, citizens of the United States must first overcome the obstacle of registration before they are able to participate in federal, state, and local elections. To preserve federalism, registration laws vary by state and citizens must register in their local country. Because the youth is a very mobile

group, laws that require registration in a certain district further complicate voting for young citizens. According to one study cited by Timpone, "Registering to vote is often much more difficult than voting itself, requiring a longer journey at a less convenient hour to complete a more complicated procedure before the peak of the campaign" (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 136). Over the past few decades, federal laws such as the Motor Voter Act in 1993 have been passed to make registration forms more accessible but still many youths are not registered to vote.

Most recently, non-partisan groups such as *Rock the Vote* and *Headcount* have formed specifically to engage youth citizens and make registration simple. Heather Smith, the executive Director of *Rock the Vote* states that this year they had the largest youth registration drive in the history of the United States, citing that 2.54 million downloaded registration forms from *Rock the Vote*, up from 1.2 million in 2004 (Wenzel). Smith says that that mission of *Rock the Vote* is "to use new technology and pop culture to attract young people to politics that might otherwise not get involved"(Wenzel). Organizations like *Rock the Vote* use methods such celebrity endorsements and rock concerts to engage younger generations, but it is more likely that their success in registering young voters can be attributed to the convenience of downloading a form online, or being handed a form in person at an event. While non-partisan and non-profit efforts are often viewed as more credible, partisan groups also play a large roll in voter registration. Volunteers on campuses across the country handed out voter registration forms on behalf of one candidate or the other. Peer-to-peer groups such as "Buckeyes for Obama" on The Ohio State University campus provided students with registration forms during high traffic college football game days. Obtaining a form without having to go out of one's way by visiting the DMV or Board of Elections significantly lowers the cost of registration.

According to Plutzer's Developmental Theory of Voting, once citizens overcome the initial barrier of registering to vote and they vote for the first time, they are more like to continue to vote in subsequent elections (Plutzer, 2002). Therefore, the many youth who participated for the first time in the 2004 Election were highly likely to vote again in 2008, especially given the high stimulation of the Election. In addition to the registered voters from 2000 and 2004 who still fall in to the youth category, an even more impressive number newly regis-

tered voters from 2008 registration efforts contributed to the record number of youth voters who cast ballots in the Election.

### *Campaign Organization*

While political campaigns do not often influence strong partisan preferences the campaign is effective as a vehicle of voter mobilization (Shaw). According to a study conducted after the 2004 Election, “one explanation for higher rates of participation in the battleground states” was the “greater voter outreach and political advertising in these states. Current research shows that youth participate when they are asked to do so” (Donovan et al. 2005). Campaign activities are also known to increase political information as well as issue and candidate perceptions (Shaw, 39) As a result of increased political awareness, more citizens tend to turn out. A study published in *American Behavioral Scientist* found that in the past, the youth have been mostly ignored by presidential campaigns. They were ignored by television networks, and rarely mentioned in political ads run by the candidates or in the debates (Bystrom et al, 2007). Because young citizens are typically not a very large or powerful group in comparison to the rest of the electorate, candidates and their campaigns often neglect them (Kaid et al., 2007). In 2008, this trend was reversed by Barack Obama’s youth focus, which began with the Iowa Caucus.

Barack Obama reached out to young citizens in a way that no presidential candidate has done before. In Iowa, Obama’s campaign held rallies across the state and met with student leaders from the area instead of focusing solely on large fundraisers. Additionally, Obama hired Hans Riemer, a former employee of *Rock the Vote* as his youth-coordinator (Drehle). Obama’s campaign especially emphasized personal contact and grassroots campaigning that extended far beyond Iowa into every state of the union to court the youth vote. According to Gallup poll “adults under 30 years of age are twice as likely to have been contacted by the Obama campaign versus by the McCain campaign: 40% vs. 20% (Gallup, 2008). Exposure to a political campaign and campaign messages has also been shown to increase young citizen’s sense of political efficacy, contributing to their likelihood to vote (Kaid, 2007). By engaging the youth through strategic grassroots campaigning and peer-to-peer networks, Barack Obama was able to mobilize youth voters.

### *The Internet as a Campaign Tool and Source of Political Information*

Using the Internet as a means of obtaining political knowledge and reaching voters is unique to 21st century politics, and especially significant in the 2008 Election. According to a study done by the Pew Research Center in 2003, “Internet sources have become increasingly important for young voters: Forty-three percent of those who go online for political news do so because they “could not get all the news and information they wanted from traditional news sources” (Kaid, 2007). As the Internet becomes more and more frequently used, this statistic is only likely to increase. A 2004 study cites that websites the youth perceive as providing information effectively and efficiently are likely to increase political interest (Lupia et al., 2005). The same study also suggests that the Internet’s potential to affect the youth’s political interest is substantial, especially if a particular site catches their attention.

In 2008, political campaigns were launched on the Internet in a whole new scope. Both Obama and McCain had their own candidate-centered websites where individuals could make donations and learn about the issues. Additionally, the cost for Internet users to obtain political information was minimal. Interested youth could learn all they wanted about candidate’s positions on the issues as well as contribute small individual donations at the click of a mouse. While President Elect Obama spent a total of over 14 million dollars on Internet Media and Advertising, Senator McCain spent only about 3 million on Internet campaigning (opensecrets.org). Both of these numbers are a significant increase from the 2004 Election in which George W. Bush spent one dollar on Internet media. The extensive use of the Internet exercised by Obama’s campaign was incredibly strategic. Obama’s campaign relied substantially on a new Internet site, BlueStateDigital.com, which has emerged to meet candidate’s needs to maintain websites as a fundamental aspect of their campaigns. According to the Blue State Digital Website,

Senator Barack Obama retained BSD to manage the online fundraising, constituency-building, issue advocacy, and peer-to-peer online networking aspects of his 2008 Presidential primary campaign. To date, the campaign has used the BSD Online Tools to mobilize well over a million donors to contribute over \$300 million online, to motivate over 850,000 social networking participants, and to create and promote more than 50,000 events across the

country. (<http://www.Bluestatedigital.com>).

In addition to his own personal website, Obama's campaign made use of the popular networking websites Facebook and My Space. On Election day, the Facebook homepage also featured non-partisan mobilization advertisements telling students to go out and vote, and kept a tally running of the number of Facebook users who had already been to the polls. These novel methods of campaign advertisement may also have helped contribute to youth mobilization by increasing awareness.

### YouTube

YouTube is a broadband Internet video-sharing website with a demographic that includes a substantial bloc of the population. In 2006, YouTube was recognized as a way to access an unlimited amount of potential voters (Gueroguieva, 2008). YouTube is just one of many websites that have increased the potential for candidates to reach to citizens to recruit volunteers, solicit small contributions, and especially air political ads for extremely low costs. A study in done on the use of YouTube in 2006 predicted that social networking sites on the Internet would become a necessity in the 2008 Election and as projected, in the 2008 primary season Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and John Edwards all used online videos to announce their White House candidacies (Gueroguiva, 2008).

In the 2008 General Election both the Obama and McCain campaigns used YouTube as a major medium for political ads. In addition to the ads put out by the candidates, other partisan groups also used YouTube to post their own ads on behalf of candidates. Using YouTube as a means to communicate with young voters is both cheap and effective as it allows citizens to view campaign ads at their own convenience and as many times as they would like. As campaign ads become more widely distributed and available to the youth, they are become more knowledgeable about the differences between the candidates and the issues, and consequently gain a higher level of political efficacy. Both increased levels of efficacy and larger perceived differences between the candidates contribute to higher turnout.

### *The Obama Effect*

According to Charlie Cook of the *Cook Political Report* there was something about the idea of the first African-American president that really resonated with youth in 2008. The candidacy

and campaign of Barack Obama appears to have inspired and motivated young citizens in a way that no political figure has been capable of in the recent past, and in a way that is difficult to capture using statistics or models of voter behavior. As indicated by this study, Obama represented a vastly different alternative to John McCain, was perceived as better equipped to handle important issues, used a ground army of partisan volunteers to reduce the cost of registration, and campaigned strategically using both the Internet and more traditional grassroots methods, but there was something else about his candidacy that reached out this generation's youth. An article in *Time Magazine* claims that Obama "tells young people they can make a difference, and they decide to vote, thus making a difference" (Von Drehle). The inclusivity of his campaign made the youth feel as though they were contributing to a historic movement within the United States. The mission statement on his website homepage reads, "I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington...I'm asking you to believe in yours." Obama made the youth feel as if they had a stake in this election and that they could help promote change, which may have increased both internal and external political efficacy.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study analyzed a few of the many important factors contributing to increased youth participation in 2008. Other factors that may have contributed to the youth turnout that were not addressed include talk show media, television news media, telephone calls, mass e-mails, and celebrity endorsements among others. Even though the youth vote did increase dramatically in 2008, it continues lag behind turnout levels of other age groups in the electorate. Both partisan and non-partisan registration efforts are fundamentally important to help the youth overcome the initial barriers to first time voting. Perceived candidate differences and the emergence of important issues also contributed to increased turnout among the electorate as a whole. Increasing party polarization can help explain increasing youth turnout since the 2000 election but certain aspects of the Obama campaign were particularly appealing to the youth and inevitably contributed to the significant rise in youth voting in 2008. Candidates in the future should continue to court the newly tapped resource of youth citizens

by maximizing ground organization, peer-to-peer campaigning, and Internet media. In 2008, Obama both captivated and captured the youth, and if Plutzer's Developmental Theory of Voter Behavior holds true, and those who participated in the 2008 Election continue to vote, the Democrats can look forward to a whole new baseline in future elections. After defeat in 2008, the Republican Party is likely to change some of their strategies, and paying more attention to the youth might be a good place to start.

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