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Voter Registration Among Young People

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The voter registration rate in presidential elections among young people rose from 2000 to 2004. Sixty percent of young people, ages 18-29, said they were registered to vote in the 2004 Presidential election, according to analysis of the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement. This rise in registration rates is promising for the youth vote since registering to vote is sometimes more difficult than the act of voting itself.³

Table 1 – Voter Registration Rates Among 18-29 year old Citizens, by type of Election Year

<i>Presidential Election Years</i>	<i>Voter Registration Rates Among 18-29 year old Citizens</i>	<i>Midterm Election Years</i>	<i>Voter Registration Rates Among 18-29 year old Citizens</i>
1972	64%	1974	48%
1976	58%	1978	48%
1980	58%	1982	50%
1984	60%	1986	51%
1988	56%	1990	49%
1992	62%	1994	50%
1996	62%	1998	55%
2000	55%	2002	56%
2004	60%	2006	51%

Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 1972-2006.

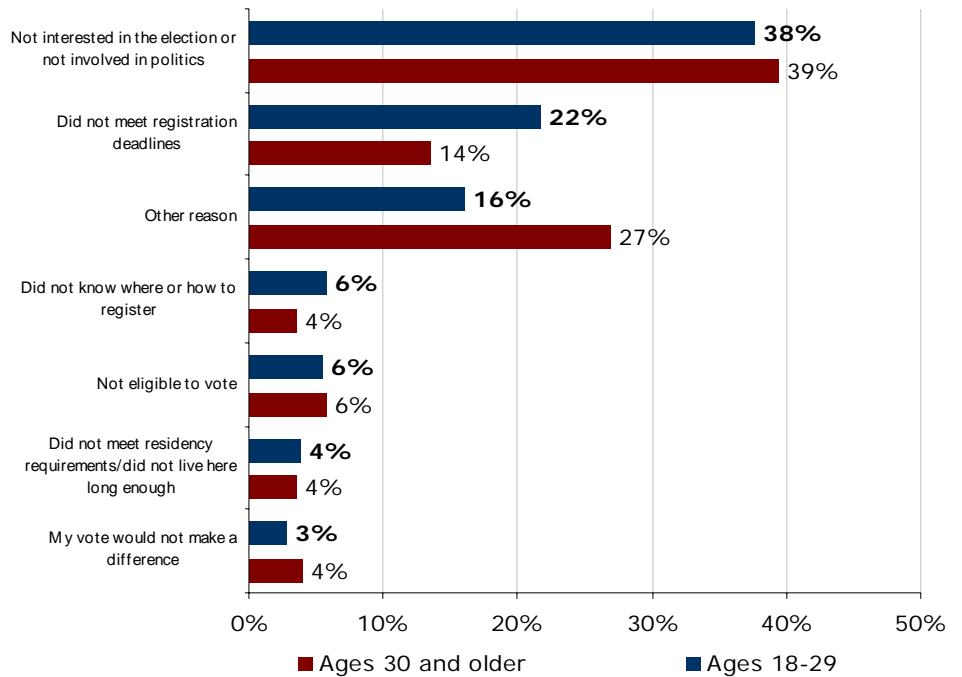
Electoral participation in the United States is a two-step process. First, a potential voter must register to vote. Second, the registered voter may vote (having determined where and how). The federal government and state and local governments have recognized the importance of lowering barriers to voter registration. The National Voter Registration Act (1993) and the Help America Vote Act (2002) are two examples of federal laws aimed at encouraging citizens to register to vote by streamlining the voter registration process. Levine (2007) sums up the idea behind this strategy: "The idea is to make voting easier, thereby raising youth turnout, thereby giving politicians more reason to mobilize young people."⁴

Despite legislative progress, registration rates among young people have been lower than those of their adult counterparts. This is partly because young people face unique barriers to voter registration. Figure 1 shows the reasons why young people (and adults) were not registered to vote in the 2004 Presidential election.⁵ Young people, when compared to their adult counterparts, were more likely to fail to meet registration deadlines (22 percent versus 14 percent) and to not know where or how to register (6 percent versus 4 percent). However, contrary to conventional wisdom, young people were no more likely than adults were to cite a lack of interest in the election as the main reason they did not register to vote in 2004 (38 percent and 39 percent, respectively).

Voter Registration and Voter Turnout Rates

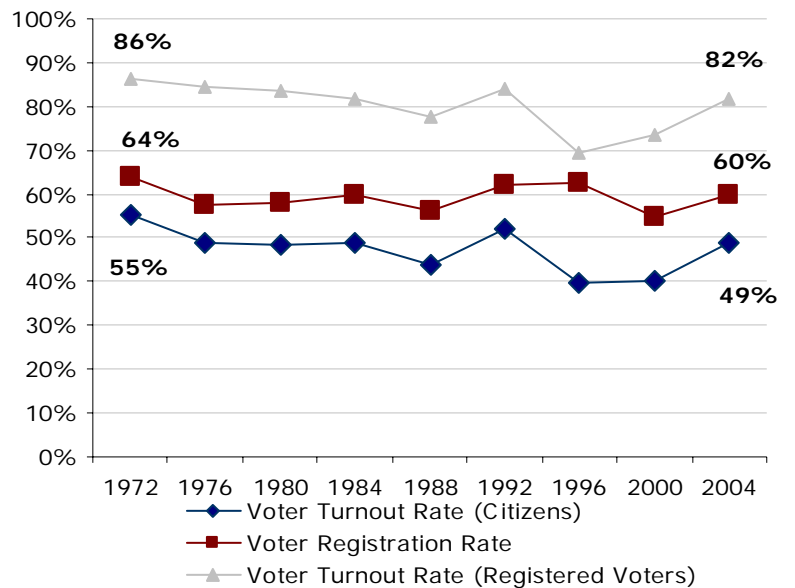
Voter turnout rates are positively correlated with voter registration rates (see Figure 2). In presidential elections since 1972 (with one exception) whenever the youth voter registration rate rose from one election year to the next, the youth voter turnout also increased.

Figure 1: Main Reason that People Were Not Registered to Vote, 2004



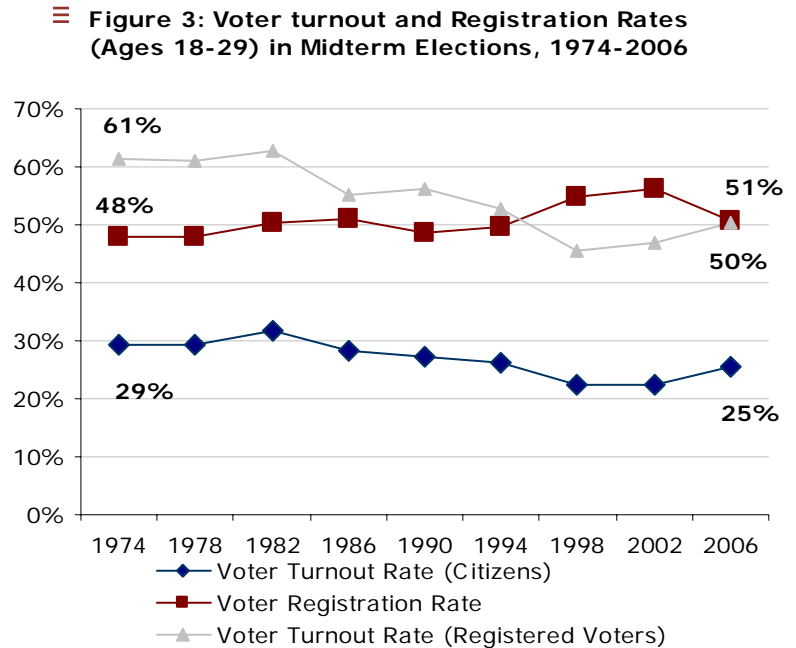
Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 2004

Figure 2: Voter turnout and Registration Rates (Ages 18-29) in Presidential Elections, 1972-2004



Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 1972-2004

The link between voter registration and voter turnout rates is not as straightforward in midterm elections, however. As Figure 3 shows, after 1994 there is a negative relationship between registration and voter turnout rates (among citizens). One explanation for this trend is that most elections since the mid 1990s have not been as contested as they had been in previous election cycles.⁶



Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 1974-2006

How Citizens Register to Vote

Table 2 shows how young people registered to vote for the 2006 and 2004 elections. The plurality of young people registered at a department of motor vehicles (30 percent in 2006 and 27 percent in 2004); registering by mail was runner-up in both years (14 percent in both years). For adults going to a town hall or county/government registration office topped the list (23 percent in 2006).

Table 2 - How Citizens Registered to Vote in 2006 and 2004, by Age

	Ages 18-29		Ages 30 and older	
	2006	2004	2006	2004
At a department of motor vehicles (for example, when obtaining a driver's license or other identification card)	30%	27%	19%	18%
Don't Know	14%	13%	18%	17%
Registered by mail	14%	14%	13%	12%
At a school, hospital, or on campus	13%	12%	6%	4%
Went to a town hall or county/government registration office	12%	14%	23%	27%
Filled out form at a registration drive (library, post office, or someone came to your door)	6%	9%	6%	8%
Registered at polling place (on election day or primary day)	6%	5%	8%	7%
Other	4%	5%	6%	6%
At a public assistance agency (for example, a Medicaid, AFDC, or Food Stamps office, an office serving disabled persons, or an unemployment office)	1%	1%	1%	1%

Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 2004-2006

Registration Rates by Demographic Subgroups, 1972-2006

Tables 3 – 5 show the registration rates of 18-29 year old citizens in presidential and midterm election years by gender, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, marital status, and urbanicity.

As Table 3 shows, young women had higher registration rates than did young men in the last two election cycles. In the presidential election years 2000 and 2004, young African-Americans had higher rates than their white, Latino, and Asian-American counterparts. In other research, CIRCLE reports that Latinos are most likely to find it difficult to register to vote.⁷

Table 3 – Registration Rates of 18-29 year old Citizens by Gender and Race

<i>Presidential Election Years</i>	<i>All 18-29s</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>			
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian</i>
1972	64.1%	63.4%	64.6%	65.3%	54.9%	***	***
1976	57.6%	57.0%	58.3%	60.2%	47.0%	40.5%	***
1980	57.8%	56.9%	58.7%	60.2%	49.8%	40.8%	***
1984	60.0%	57.9%	62.0%	60.8%	62.2%	47.7%	***
1988	56.4%	54.0%	58.5%	57.3%	56.0%	47.0%	***
1992	62.0%	60.0%	63.9%	63.9%	58.7%	51.3%	***
1996	62.4%	60.2%	64.5%	63.8%	63.2%	52.1%	58.5%
2000	54.9%	52.1%	57.5%	56.8%	56.9%	43.6%	40.7%
2004	60.0%	56.8%	63.2%	63.3%	59.8%	47.5%	42.1%

<i>Midterm Election Years</i>	<i>All 18-29s</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Race and Ethnicity</i>			
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Asian</i>
1974	48.1%	48.1%	48.1%	49.7%	42.2%	34.8%	***
1978	47.9%	46.9%	48.8%	49.0%	44.8%	36.8%	***
1982	50.4%	49.8%	50.9%	51.5%	49.1%	37.7%	***
1986	50.9%	49.7%	52.1%	51.3%	54.2%	41.8%	***
1990	48.6%	47.7%	49.5%	49.6%	47.7%	40.8%	***
1994	49.6%	48.4%	50.8%	51.7%	47.0%	37.9%	37.7%
1998	55.0%	52.4%	57.5%	56.2%	57.3%	46.8%	42.3%
2002	56.2%	53.9%	58.3%	57.6%	58.6%	45.9%	49.6%
2006	50.8%	48.5%	53.0%	54.1%	46.2%	42.7%	37.8%

Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 1972-2006.
 '***' means that data was not available in these years.

Young people with a bachelor's degree or more had the highest registration rates. Married young people surpassed single young people in registration rates in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. See Table 4.

Table 4 – Registration Rates of 18-29 year old Citizens by Educational Attainment and Marital Status						
<i>Presidential Election Years</i>	<i>Educational Attainment</i>				<i>Marital Status</i>	
	<i>Less than High School</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>Some College</i>	<i>B.A. or more</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Single</i>
1972	37.0%	59.3%	77.0%	85.7%	***	***
1976	30.9%	49.9%	68.7%	82.8%	56.6%	58.8%
1980	29.3%	51.8%	68.2%	83.9%	57.9%	57.8%
1984	33.7%	53.4%	70.5%	83.6%	59.9%	60.1%
1988	31.6%	47.8%	66.0%	79.5%	56.0%	56.6%
1992	33.6%	52.4%	72.5%	85.5%	61.1%	62.6%
1996	37.1%	53.5%	71.6%	81.9%	62.2%	62.5%
2000	30.9%	46.1%	61.5%	80.0%	61.9%	52.4%
2004	34.4%	51.2%	68.9%	76.0%	63.1%	59.5%
<i>Midterm Election Years</i>	<i>Educational Attainment</i>				<i>Marital Status</i>	
	<i>Less than High School</i>	<i>High School</i>	<i>Some College</i>	<i>B.A. or more</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Single</i>
1974	24.0%	44.3%	58.4%	65.9%	47.6%	48.8%
1978	25.4%	42.9%	57.2%	67.6%	48.4%	47.4%
1982	27.8%	46.5%	57.7%	70.8%	51.2%	49.7%
1986	29.3%	46.2%	58.9%	67.9%	52.1%	49.9%
1990	26.4%	41.1%	57.3%	66.9%	48.6%	48.7%
1994	25.5%	41.5%	58.8%	66.9%	50.7%	49.0%
1998	28.8%	47.1%	64.3%	72.3%	58.6%	53.2%
2002	31.6%	47.0%	64.0%	75.6%	53.5%	45.8%
2006	26.9%	42.0%	58.5%	65.7%	55.7%	48.9%

Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 1972-2006.
 '***' means that data was not available in these years.

In presidential elections since 1992, young people in rural areas had the lowest registration rates. See Table 5.

Table 5 – Registration Rates of 18-29 year old Citizens by Urbanicity

<i>Presidential Election Years</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Suburban</i>	<i>Rural</i>
1972	***	***	***
1976	56.7%	58.1%	58.0%
1980	58.3%	55.7%	62.2%
1984	61.7%	56.7%	57.8%
1988	56.8%	54.5%	56.9%
1992	63.8%	63.8%	57.3%
1996	64.6%	62.8%	60.0%
2000	55.0%	54.5%	55.2%
2004	61.4%	59.9%	59.3%

<i>Midterm Election Years</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Suburban</i>	<i>Rural</i>
1974	48.9%	47.4%	48.3%
1978	48.1%	47.1%	49.5%
1982	50.3%	50.2%	51.9%
1986	50.3%	53.2%	48.6%
1990	49.6%	50.0%	48.9%
1994	50.0%	49.7%	49.7%
1998	54.5%	55.6%	55.3%
2002	56.6%	56.8%	54.6%
2006	50.4%	51.0%	51.3%

Source: Author's tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November (Voting) Supplement, 1972-2006.

'***' means that data was not available in these years.

Notes

¹ I thank Mark Hugo Lopez and Peter Levine for comments on earlier drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are my own.

² An earlier draft of this fact sheet contained errors for the registration rates in 2000 and 2004. This was due to an error in coding the data (respondents who fell into the categories of “refused,” “don’t know,” or “no response” were mistakenly coded as “missing” data points).

³ Fitzgerald, Mary. *Working Paper 01: Easier Voting Methods Boost Youth Turnout*. CIRCLE Working Paper Series. (2003). <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP01Fitzgerald.pdf>

Wolfinger, Ray and Rosenstone, Steven. *Who Votes?* (1980) New Haven: Yale University Press.

Also see CIRCLE Fact Sheet: “State Voter Registration and Election Day Laws,” by Emily Hoban Kirby and Mark Hugo Lopez (June 2004).

http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_StateLaws.pdf

⁴ Levine, Peter. *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*. (2007) Medford, MA: Tufts University Press.

⁵ I collapsed “Permanent illness or disability” and “Difficulty with English” into the “Other reason” category. The breakdown of these variables is presented below.

Table A – Breakdown of “Other reason” category from Figure 1		
	Ages 18-29	Ages 30 and older
Other Reason	14%	18%
Permanent illness or disability	2%	7%
Difficulty with English	0%	1%

⁶ Jenkins, Jeffrey A. “Partisanship and Contested Election Cases in the House of Representatives, 1789-2002.” *Studies in American Political Development*, 18 (Fall 2004), 112-135.

⁷ Lopez, Mark Hugo. “Electoral Engagement Among Latino Youth.” (2003). CIRCLE Fact Sheet. http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Electoral_Eng_Latino_Youth.pdf