

**The Youth Vote 2004**  
**With a Historical Look at Youth Voting Patterns,**  
**1972-2004**

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## INTRODUCTION

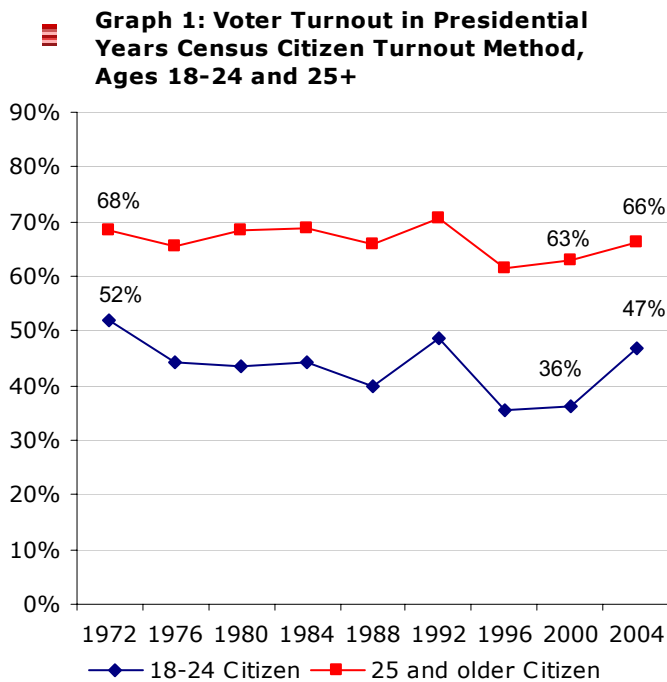
Estimates from all sources suggest that voter turnout among young people in 2004 has surged to its highest level in a decade.<sup>1</sup> This is a sharp break from recent years, and suggests that the confluence of extensive voter outreach efforts, a close election, and high levels of interest in the 2004 campaign all worked to drive voter turnout among young people to levels not seen since 1992. However, it remains to be seen if this increase is part of a new trend, or is instead a temporary spike in turnout similar to that observed in the 1992 election.

This report presents trends in voter participation among young people from multiple data sources and discusses the different methods that are used to generate these statistics. The report shows that there are several reasonable estimates of youth turnout for any particular year; no

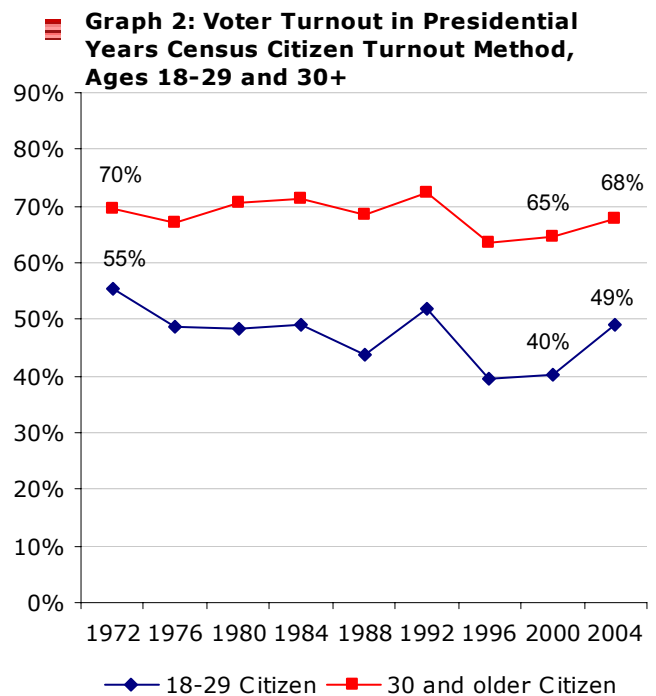
single number is authoritative. At the same time, the report shows that *all* reasonable methods yield the same overall story: youth turnout declined from 1972 to 2000, with the exception of a strong surge in 1992; and youth turnout sharply rose again in 2004.

## MEASURING VOTER PARTICIPATION

There are three metrics of voter participation that one can use to assess the level of youth electoral involvement. First, one can calculate the voter turnout rate by taking the number of votes cast and dividing it by the number of age-eligible citizens in the population. This is the most common measure used, and generally the measure people think of when discussing voter participation. Second, one can look at the share of all voters that young people represented. Exit polls on Election Day often present us with this important measure. It is often the first and most immediate measure available after an election. Third, one can



Source: CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972 to 2004.



Source: CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972 to 2004.

examine the raw number of votes cast by young people. According to all three metrics, young people voted in far greater numbers in 2004 than in 2000. We discuss all three methods of calculating youth electoral participation later in this report.

### COMPLICATIONS OF MEASURING VOTER PARTICIPATION

Measuring youth turnout raises difficult issues that complicate the determination of a single voter turnout number. First, there is no official count of voters that records their ages. All estimates depend in one way or another on surveys. Survey results differ because of their methodologies. All rely on self-reports of voters, which suggests that any estimate of participation may be overstated.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is impossible to extend the trend in youth voter participation to elections before 1972 because citizens between 18 and 20 years old were first given the right to vote that year. Finally, there is disagreement among researchers about whether to include in the turnout statistics non-citizens, felons, and others who are ineligible to vote. In this working paper, we explore all these issues and discuss the limitations of data sources and methods for estimating voter participation.

### YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT UP SHARPLY IN 2004 ACCORDING TO THE STANDARD CENSUS MEASURE

The most widely cited measure of turnout is the one calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Census Bureau derives an estimate of the number of young voters from a survey that it conducts immediately following a general election. The Census Bureau then divides that figure by an estimate of the number of young *citizen residents* of the United States. While the "Census Citizen Method" yields just one estimate of turnout, and its methodology can be debated, it generates results similar to those observed using other methods.<sup>3</sup> Like other methods, the Census Citizen Method shows that youth voter turnout rose significantly in 2004, and young people exhibited the greatest increase of any age group in voter turnout between 2000 and 2004. Table 1 shows that voter turnout among young people ages 18-24 jumped 11 percentage points between 2000 and 2004. Graphs 1 and 2, and Table 1, show the voter turnout rate for young people versus older voters in presidential election years from 1972 to 2004. In each case, for both 18-24 and 18-29 year olds, the increase in voter turnout among young people outpaced the growth in voter turnout among adults in the last election cycle.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: Voter Turnout Among Citizens  
November 2000 and 2004**

<b>Age Group</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Percentage Point Increase</b>
18-24	36%	47%	+11 % points
25-34	51%	56%	+5 % points
35-44	60%	64%	+4 % points
45-54	66%	69%	+3 % points
55-64	70%	73%	+3 % points
65-74	72%	73%	+1 % points
75+	67%	69%	+2 % points
<b>All Ages</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>+4 % points</b>

Source: Authors' Tabulations from Census Bureau, Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement 2004.

Young people also increased their share of the electorate in 2004, representing a greater portion of voters than in 2000. Based on Census Bureau data, young people age 18-24 comprised 9.3% of the electorate in 2004 compared to 7.8% in 2000. Youth share statistics from the CPS are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Youth Share of the Electorate and Citizen Populations, Presidential Years 1972-2004**

	<i>Youth Share of Citizens</i>		<i>Youth Share of Votes Cast</i>		<i>Difference Between Share of Cit. Pop. and Share of Votes Cast</i>	
	<b>18-24</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>18-24</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>18-24</b>	<b>18-29</b>
	1972	17.9%	28.6%	14.2%	24.2%	3.7%
1976	18.2%	29.8%	13.1%	23.6%	5.1%	6.2%
1980	17.8%	29.5%	12.1%	22.3%	5.7%	7.3%
1984	16.4%	28.7%	11.2%	21.7%	5.2%	7.0%
1988	14.1%	25.7%	9.1%	18.1%	5.1%	7.6%
1992	12.8%	23.0%	9.2%	17.7%	3.6%	5.3%
1996	12.5%	22.0%	7.6%	14.9%	4.9%	7.1%
2000	12.8%	21.1%	7.8%	14.3%	5.0%	6.8%
2004	12.6%	20.9%	9.3%	16.0%	3.4%	4.8%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from Census Bureau, Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement, 1972-2004

**Table 3: Number of Votes Cast (in thousands) Presidential Election Years 1972 to 2004**

	<i>All Votes Cast</i>	<i>Votes Cast by 18-24</i>	<i>Votes Cast by 25 &amp; Older</i>	<i>Votes Cast by 18-29</i>	<i>Votes Cast by 30 &amp; Older</i>
1972	85,766	12,215	73,551	20,745	65,021
1976	86,698	11,367	75,331	20,473	66,225
1980	93,066	11,225	81,840	20,718	72,348
1984	101,878	11,407	90,471	22,091	79,787
1988	102,224	9,254	92,969	18,513	83,711
1992	113,866	10,442	103,424	20,157	93,709
1996	105,017	7,996	97,021	15,649	89,368
2000	110,826	8,635	102,191	15,864	94,962
2004	125,736	11,639	114,097	20,125	105,611

Source: Authors' Tabulations from Census Bureau, Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2004.

Finally, in 2004 young people age 18-24 cast over 11.5 million votes—an increase of more than 3 million votes between 2000 and 2004. Young people age 18-29 cast over 20 million votes—an increase of more than 4 million votes between 2000 and 2004. Estimates of the number of votes cast by different age groups are shown in Table 3.

### **COMPLICATIONS OF ESTIMATING YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT**

Estimating turnout among young Americans poses several problems. First, all polls and surveys are random samples of a whole population. As samples, they have error and cannot produce exact counts of votes or estimates of voter turnout. Second, there is no consensus among researchers about the best way to count the eligible voting population or, more significantly, which number should be in the denominator of the voter turnout calculation. Finally, since 18- to 20-year-olds were given the right to vote only in 1972, we cannot compare today's youth with young people from past generations. Below we discuss each complication in detail, first by discussing complications associated with each data source, and then second, discussing general problems with calculating voter turnout measures.

### **PROBLEMS WITH USING POLLS AND SURVEYS TO ESTIMATE YOUTH TURNOUT**

As was mentioned above, polls and surveys are our only means of calculating turnout for any age group. The Federal Election Commission (FEC), which keeps official statistics on the number of ballots cast, does not have any way of knowing voters' ages. (When Americans vote, we do not disclose how old we are.) Thus, we have to rely on polls and surveys to estimate youth turnout, and, again, all polls and surveys of voting behavior have some type of error. Thus it is *never possible to say with certainty how many*

*young people voted in any given year.* As a result, we must rely on surveys and polls to estimate the number of voters.

### **CENSUS BUREAU'S CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (CPS) NOVEMBER VOTING AND REGISTRATION SUPPLEMENTS**

There are both advantages and disadvantages of using the CPS. Perhaps the biggest disadvantage of using this data source comes from the fact that it relies on self-reports. All surveys that ask people whether they voted produce inflated turnout estimates, since some people mistakenly—or falsely—report that they participated.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the CPS is not available immediately following an election; typically CPS data are not publicly released for several months after an election. Therefore, the CPS is not a good source for estimating the youth vote immediately following any given midterm or presidential election.

However, the CPS is rigorous, has a large sample, and is conducted within two weeks after each election, when people are still likely to remember whether or not they voted. Because the CPS has such a large sample with rich demographic information—over 100,000 people were interviewed in 2004—it can be used to estimate voting trends among various groups. For example, the CPS can be used to estimate changes in voting patterns for young women and men, for racial and ethnic groups, and for young people of differing education levels. Finally, the CPS is a good source for longitudinal data on young voters. Unlike exit polls, the CPS has used a consistent methodology throughout the years so trend lines can be created for young voters all the way back to 1972.

### **EXIT POLLS**

Another way to calculate youth turnout is to combine Election Day exit polls with vote counts from the Secretaries of State and the Census Bureau's estimate of youth population. Exit polls are not as reliable as

the CPS for estimating turnout within specific demographic groups because their sample sizes are often too small to produce reliable estimates for demographic subgroups. They are also problematic for estimating changes in voter turnout over time. Because the exit poll methodology has changed over the years, 1988 is the first year for which we can reliably estimate youth voter turnout using exit poll data. Finally, exit polls are conducted at the polling place on Election Day, which means that they generally miss people who voted early or absentee. Recent exit polls have incorporated telephone surveys to address this limitation, though only in a limited number of states.

Exit polls do have some advantages. First, they are surveys of people who actually voted, so there is much less risk that respondents will falsely or mistakenly claim to have cast a ballot. Second, exit polls are available immediately following an election. Therefore, they can be used to produce quick estimates of how young people voted in any given year. Finally, unlike the CPS, exit polls tell us a lot about the political attitudes and preferences of voters. They can be used to find out a variety of young voters' opinions, including which candidates they prefer, how they identify politically, and the issues on which they base their vote.

### **PROBLEMS WITH COUNTING THE ELIGIBLE POPULATION**

A different kind of problem encountered when calculating youth turnout involves estimating the size of the eligible voting population. This number is important because when we calculate turnout we simply divide the number of votes cast by the number of people eligible to vote. The turnout rate therefore depends on how one estimates the eligible population. Currently, there is disagreement among researchers about the best way to estimate the size of the eligible electorate.

There are two different estimates of the

eligible electorate, commonly referred to as the Voting Age Population (VAP) and the Voting Eligible Population (VEP). Some researchers believe that the best way to estimate the voting population is to use the Voting Age Population (VAP). The VAP includes all U.S. residents age 18 years and older. The VAP is the most readily available number for estimating the voting age population and most people rely on the US Census Bureau's estimate of residents age 18 and above.<sup>6</sup> The problem with using the VAP is that it counts people who are ineligible to vote (such as non-citizens) as non-voters.

The other estimate is the VEP, which can be constructed several different ways. The main difference between the VAP and VEP involves ignoring the non-citizen population by using the Census Bureau's estimate of U.S. citizen population instead of their estimate of U.S. resident population. Using this method, non-citizens are excluded from the denominator which increases the estimated voter turnout rate.<sup>7</sup> Recently, the Census Bureau began to report on turnout using the citizen VEP.

Some scholars, notably Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin, argue that simply excluding non-citizens from the VEP is not enough. In order to get an accurate estimate of the VEP we have to exclude all people who are ineligible to vote, not just non-citizens. This is particularly important since some adult residents of the United States are ineligible to vote for one of several reasons: because they do not have US citizenship; because they have committed a felony and been stripped of voting rights by state laws; because they have been ruled mentally incompetent; or because they have failed to meet local residency requirements. Meanwhile, some non-residents (such as U.S. government personnel posted abroad) are eligible to vote, but not counted.<sup>8</sup> Since state laws regarding ineligible citizens change often, it is extremely difficult to make the necessary adjustments for any given year.

Moreover, the percentage of ineligible

residents has grown over time. Non-naturalized immigrants have more than quadrupled from 2 percent of the voting-age population (VAP) in 1972 to 8.5 percent in 2004 and the number of ineligible felons has grown from 0.6 percent of the VAP in 1985 to 1.6 percent in 2004.<sup>9</sup>

Other researchers conclude that *all* ineligible residents should be counted as non-voters, because a decline in votes cast per adult population is a real decline in the degree of participation in our democracy. They also note that it would be constitutional to allow non-citizens and felons to vote, but we have made deliberate choices not to do so.<sup>10</sup>

For our purposes, this debate is somewhat beside the point. Whether you use the VAP, the citizen VEP, or the VEP as defined by McDonald and Popkin, the trend in youth voting over time is the same. The important thing to remember is that any report on youth voting is simply an estimate.

#### **NO COMPARISONS BEFORE 1972**

A final complication is that citizens between the ages of 18 and 20 were not permitted to vote in Federal elections until 1972. Thus we cannot compare today's youth with people born before 1951.

In conclusion, there are many complications that arise when estimating youth turnout. Surveys have errors, there are different ways to calculate the eligible population, and there is no way to compare young voters today to young voters born before 1951. Despite these complications, there are five good methods for estimating turnout and they all produce the same trends in youth voting over time. None of these methods should be used to derive a precise turnout rate for young people in any given year because our data come from surveys, which rely on self-reports of voter participation. The only thing we know for sure is that while young people still vote at lower rates than adults, in 2004 their turnout reached its highest level in more than a

decade.

## **DIFFERENT METHODS FOR ESTIMATING YOUTH VOTER TURNOUT**

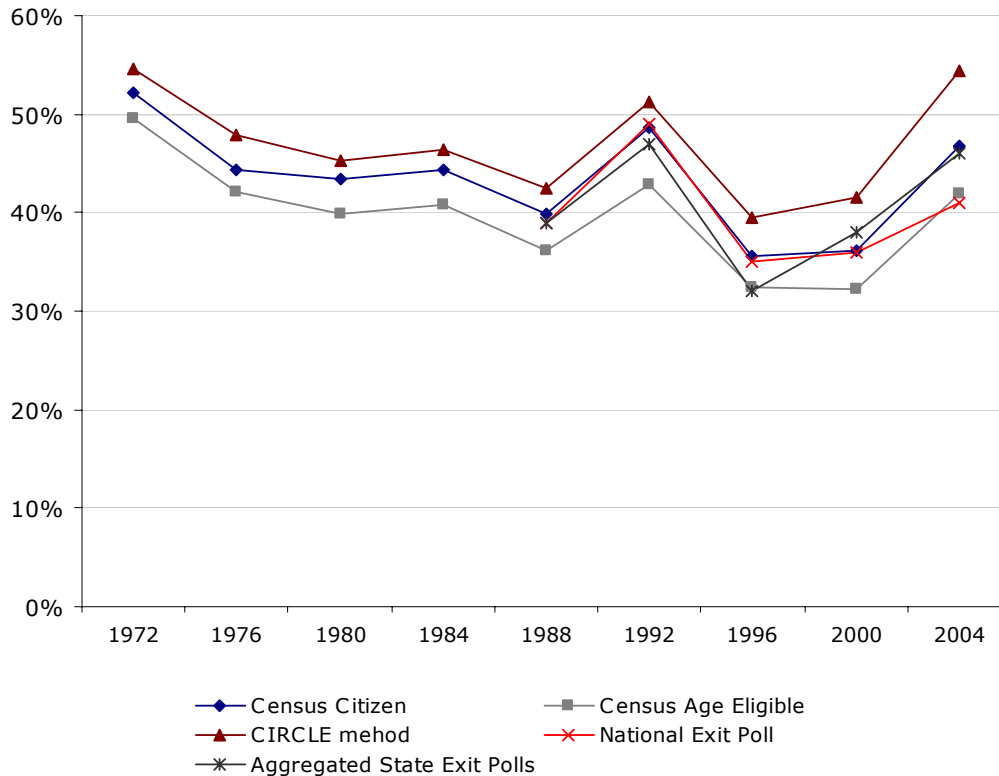
In the following section, we describe five methods for calculating youth turnout in some technical detail. First, however, we present all the methods on the same graph and table to demonstrate the similarity of their results.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 4 – Voter Turnout for 18-24 Year olds  
Presidential Years 1972 to 2004  
Five Methods**

	<i>Methodology</i>				
	<i>Census Citizen</i>	<i>Census Resident</i>	<i>CIRCLE Citizen</i>	<i>National Exit Poll</i>	<i>Aggregated State Exit Polls</i>
1972	52.1%	49.6%	54.6%	***	***
1976	44.4%	42.2%	47.8%	***	***
1980	43.4%	39.9%	45.3%	***	***
1984	44.3%	40.8%	46.4%	***	***
1988	39.9%	36.2%	42.4%	***	***
1992	48.6%	42.8%	51.3%	49%	48%
1996	35.6%	32.4%	39.5%	35%	32%
2000	36.1%	32.3%	41.6%	36%	38%
2004	46.7%	41.9%	54.4%	41%	46%

Source: Authors' tabulations from CPS November Supplements, 1972 to 2004, and National and State Exit Polls from 1992 to 2004 and vote tallies two days after national elections as reported by the Associated Press.

**Graph 3: Voter Turnout Among 18-24 Year olds in Presidential Years (Five Measures)**





## ESTIMATING YOUTH TURNOUT USING THE CENSUS BUREAU'S CPS NOVEMBER VOTING AND REGISTRATION SUPPLEMENTS

**Census Citizen Method:** The most common way to estimate youth voter turnout is to use CPS data to calculate voter turnout among U.S. citizens, making the assumption that people who do not respond to the voting questions on the survey did not vote. We call this method the "Census Citizen Method." To calculate turnout among citizens we tally the estimated number of votes cast by an age group and then divide that number by the estimated number of citizens that age. This method is used by the Census and most researchers when presenting estimates of voter turnout.<sup>12</sup> For example, in 2004, the formula for estimating voter turnout among 18-24 year olds is as follows:

$$\text{Census\_Citizen\_Voter\_Turnout} = \frac{\#\_of\_self\_reported\_voters\_age\_18\_24}{\#\_of\_citizens\_age\_18\_24}.$$

**Census Resident Method:** A second way to estimate turnout is to use CPS data to calculate turnout among the U.S. resident population. We call this method the "Census Resident Method." For many years, both the Federal Election Commission and the Census Bureau estimated turnout this way. Many political scientists also use this method.<sup>13</sup> Recently, the Census Bureau has begun to estimate turnout using the Census Citizen method outlined above. To calculate turnout using the Census Resident method, we simply tally the estimated votes cast by a certain age range and divide by that group's estimated resident population.

$$\text{Census\_resident\_Voter\_Turnout} = \frac{\#\_of\_self\_reported\_voters\_age\_18\_24}{\#\_of\_residents\_age\_18\_24}.$$

**CIRCLE Method:** A final way to estimate turnout using CPS data is to exclude from the calculations individuals who did not answer the voting question in the CPS supplements. We call this method the "CIRCLE Method." In calculating turnout using the CIRCLE method, people who refused to answer the question on voting are not counted as non-voters. (In the calculations above, the Census Citizen and Census Resident Methods count non-answers as non-voters and therefore find a lower estimated turnout rate in each year). For voters age 18-24, the Circle Method formula is:

$$CIRCLE\_Voter\_Turnout = \frac{\#\_of\_self\_reported\_voters\_age18\_24}{\#\_of\_citizens\_age18-24\_who\_answered\_the\_voting\_question}$$

## ESTIMATING YOUTH TURNOUT USING EXIT POLLS

There are two ways to estimate youth turnout using exit polls: one can calculate turnout from either the aggregated exit polls from each state or from the separate national exit poll.<sup>14</sup>

**National Exit Poll Method:** The first exit poll method involves using three data sources: the national exit poll, the Associated Press (AP) second-day vote tally, and a Census Bureau estimate of the number of U.S. citizens. We call this method the "National Exit Poll Method." To calculate turnout using the National Exit Poll Method, we multiply the number of votes cast according to the AP by the youth share of the electorate according to the national exit poll to get the number of votes cast by young people. We then divide the number of votes cast by young people by the Census Bureau's estimate of the population of young citizens. Using this method, the formula for calculating youth voter turnout in 2004 is:

$$National\_Exit\_Poll\_Turnout = \frac{[\%of\_voters\_who\_are\_age\_18\_24] * [\#\_votes\_cast]}{\#\_of\_citizens\_age\_18\_24}$$

**Aggregated State Exit Poll Method:** The second way to estimate turnout using exit polls is to aggregate data from all 50 state exit polls along with the District of Columbia exit poll. We call this method the "Aggregated State Exit Poll Method." To calculate turnout using the Aggregated State Exit Poll method, we must first estimate the number of votes cast by young people in each state. To do this we multiply the percent of young voters according to the individual state's exit poll by the number of votes cast in each state. Once this has been done for all the state polls we then add them together to get a total number of votes cast. Finally, to get the turnout figure we divide the aggregated vote tally by the aggregated youth population estimate from the Census Bureau. The formula for calculating voter turnout among 18-24 year olds in 2004 using this method is:

$$\text{Aggregated\_State\_Exit\_Poll\_Turnout} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{51} (\% \text{ of votes } 18 \text{ } 24)_i * (\# \text{ of votes cast})_i}{\sum_{i=1}^{51} (\# \text{ of citizens age } 18 \text{ } 24)_i},$$

where "i" indexes the sums across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

## Notes

### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> See the CIRCLE fact sheets [Youth Voter Turnout 1992 to 2004: Estimates from Exit Polls](#) released January 25, 2005 and [Youth Voting in the 2004 Election](#) released November 8, 2004 for estimates of the increase in youth voter participation in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Highton, Benjamin, "Self-Reported Versus Proxy-Reported Voter Turnout in the Current Population Survey." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 1, Spring 2005. pp. 113-123.

<sup>3</sup> While there is no one correct way to estimate youth voter turnout, CIRCLE has chosen to feature the most commonly-used measure, the "Census Citizen Method." In previous reports on youth voter turnout, CIRCLE chose to use the "CIRCLE Method" of estimating turnout. This method produces a slightly higher estimate than the Census Citizen Method (see pages 8 to 12 for a discussion of the different methods for estimating youth turnout). Both measures produce the same trend lines and are therefore equally valid estimates. However, to limit confusion, in 2004 we made a decision to switch to the Census Citizen Method since it is the most widely-used method for calculating turnout. Throughout this report we explain the different methods for calculating turnout and discuss the difficulties of making estimates, and choosing between competing estimation methods.

<sup>4</sup> For complete times series for all young people, and sub-groups of young people, see the spreadsheet on CIRCLE's web page called [Voter Turnout Time Series 1972 to 2004 using multiple methods](#).

<sup>5</sup> A second problem is that CPS does not collect information about whom the respondents voted for or information about the respondents' political attitudes and preferences. So, for example, we cannot use the CPS to estimate the number of people who voted for a particular candidate.

<sup>6</sup> The formula for estimating voter turnout using the VAP is:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{residents}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of residents over age 18})}$$

or:

<sup>7</sup> The formula for estimating voter turnout using the citizen VEP is:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{citizens}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{(\# \text{ of self-reported U.S. citizens over age 18})}$$

<sup>8</sup> The formula for estimating voter turnout using the VEP as constructed by McDonald and Popkin is:

$$\text{Voter Turnout}_{\text{McDonald/Popkin}} = \frac{(\# \text{ of self-reported voters})}{[(\# \text{ of self-reported U.S. citizens over age 18}) - (\# \text{ of ineligible felons}) + (\text{overseas VEP})]}$$

<sup>9</sup> McDonald, Michael and Popkin, Samuel, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter" *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4, December 2001, pp 963- 974. Michael McDonald and Samuel Popkin argue that turnout of the whole electorate has not declined to a statistically significant extent since 1972, because we should exclude ineligible people from the calculations.

<sup>10</sup> Ruy Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter*, Washington: Brookings, 1992, p. 6, note 2.

<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate (CSAE) led by Curtis Gans provides extensive information about voters, including estimates about young voters.

<sup>12</sup> Census Bureau tabulations of voter turnout among citizens are available at <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/voting/004986.html>.

<sup>13</sup> McDonald and Popkin, p. 964

<sup>14</sup> From 1992 to 2000, exit polls were conducted by the Voter News Service (VNS), a consortium of news organizations. In 2004, the VNS was replaced by the polling firms of Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International. Typically, national exit polls have a sample size of over 10,000 respondents. Aggregated state exit polls often have sample sizes of over 70,000.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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