



## **DEMOCRACY REMIXED:**

### **Black Youth and the Future of American Politics**

*A Series on Black Youth Political Engagement and the 2012 Election*

---

JON C. ROGOWSKI

CATHY J. COHEN

## **The Political Impact of Young People of Color in the 2012 Election**

Young people played a pivotal role in the 2008 election. As previous reports in this series have shown, in 2008 young people turned out to vote at the highest rates since 18-year-olds received the right to vote in 1972. Moreover, this increase in turnout was driven entirely by higher levels of turnout among people of color—particularly young Blacks and Latinos. During the 2012 presidential campaigns, many people doubted that these high levels of engagement could be sustained. In this report, we outline the role played by young people—particularly young people of color—in the 2012 election. We discuss the following findings:

- Blacks and Latinos comprised an increasingly larger share of the voting electorate in each of the last three presidential elections. In 2012, young people under 30 years of age accounted for nearly 20 percent of the voting electorate, and Blacks and Latinos made up almost half of young voters.
- Since 2004, there has been increasing polarization in vote choice among racial groups. Whites across all age groups support Democratic candidates at considerably lower rates than Blacks and Latinos, while support for Democratic candidates has increased among Blacks and Latinos.
- Young Blacks and Latinos supported President Obama in 2012 at about the same rates they did in 2008, while support for Obama among young whites dropped substantially.
- In 2012 the majority of white youth—51%—voted for Governor Romney. This is a substantial change from 2008 when the majority of white youth—54%—voted for Barack Obama.

## Racial Composition of the Electorate

People of color—and Blacks and Latinos specifically—comprise increasingly large portions of the voting electorate. Not only are people of color gaining numbers in the population (especially Latinos), but voter turnout among these groups is also increasing relative to whites. Table 1 below shows how the proportion of voters (of all ages) by racial group in the last three presidential elections. Since 2004, the proportion of white voters has decreased from 78 percent to 72 percent, while the proportion of Black and Latino voters has increased from 18 percent to 23 percent.

Table 1: Composition of the Voting Electorate by Race (all ages), 2004-2012

Racial Group	2004 (%)	2008 (%)	2012 (%)
Blacks	11	13	13
Latinos	7	9	10
Whites	78	74	72

Source: 2004, 2008 and 2012 National Exit Polls.

These dynamics are especially important to consider among youth, for two key reasons. First, young people are playing an increasingly important role at the ballot box. Voters under the age of 30 have increased their presence at the polls in each of the last three elections. In 2012, nearly one in five voters (19 percent) was under the age of thirty. Second, these young voters are increasingly people of color. Young Blacks are turning out to vote at historically high levels, and Latinos are both increasing in the population and voting at higher levels. Thus, understanding the youth vote requires paying attention to the role of increasing influence of young people of color.

Table 2: Composition of the Voting Electorate by Race (ages 18-29), 2004-2012

Racial Group	2004 (%)	2008 (%)	2012 (%)
Blacks	3	3	3
Latinos	2	3	4
Whites	13	11	11

Source: 2004, 2008 and 2012 National Exit Polls.

## Race, Young People, and Vote Choice

Overall, 60 percent of youth supported President Obama in the 2012 election, down slightly from 66 percent in 2008—but considerably greater than the 54 percent of the vote that youth provided John Kerry in the 2004 election. However, contrary to the idea of a monolithic youth vote, there is considerable variation by racial group among young people in whom they support for president. Furthermore, as Table 2 shows, these differences have increased in recent presidential elections. In both 2008 and 2012, Black and Latino youth voted for President Obama at substantially higher levels than they voted for fellow Democrat John Kerry in 2004. Slightly more than half (54 percent) of white youth voted for Obama in 2008, but this number fell substantially in 2012—to 44 percent, in line with the percentage of white youth that supported Kerry in 2004. However,

because of the increased percentages of young people of color that are voting, these populations have played an increasingly important role in selecting the nation’s president, and will continue to do so.

Table 2: Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates Among Youth  
(Ages 18-29), 2004-2012

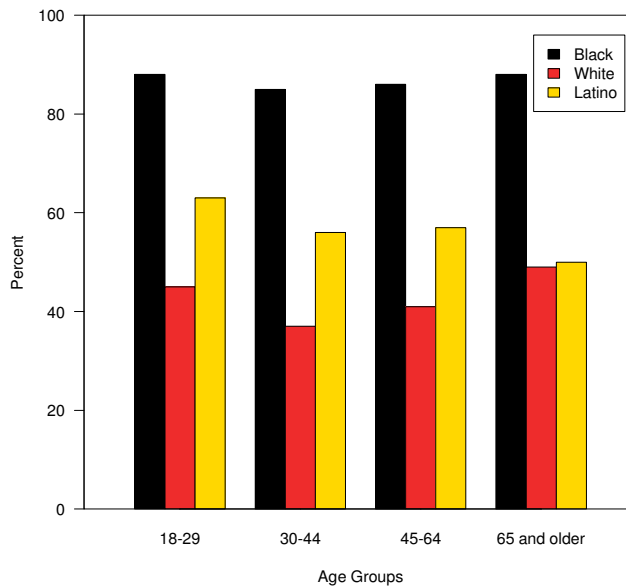
Racial Group	2004 (%)	2008 (%)	2012 (%)
<b>Blacks</b>	88	95	91
<b>Latinos</b>	63	76	74
<b>Whites</b>	45	54	44

Source: 2004, 2008 and 2012 National Exit Polls.

More generally, these patterns of racial polarization characterize voting behavior among all age groups, as Figures 1 and 2 show. In 2004, more than 80 percent of blacks across all age groups supported Democrat John Kerry, compared with roughly 40 percent of whites of each age group, and just shy of 60 percent among Latinos. In 2008, however, Blacks and Latinos of all age groups supported Obama at higher levels than they did Kerry. With the exception of the youngest age group, whites, however, all supported Obama at *lower* rates than they did Kerry four years earlier. These patterns solidified in 2012, in which whites of all age groups voted for Obama at 40 percent or less, while Blacks supported Obama at rates upwards of 90 percent and at least 60 percent of Latinos of all age groups voted for Obama.

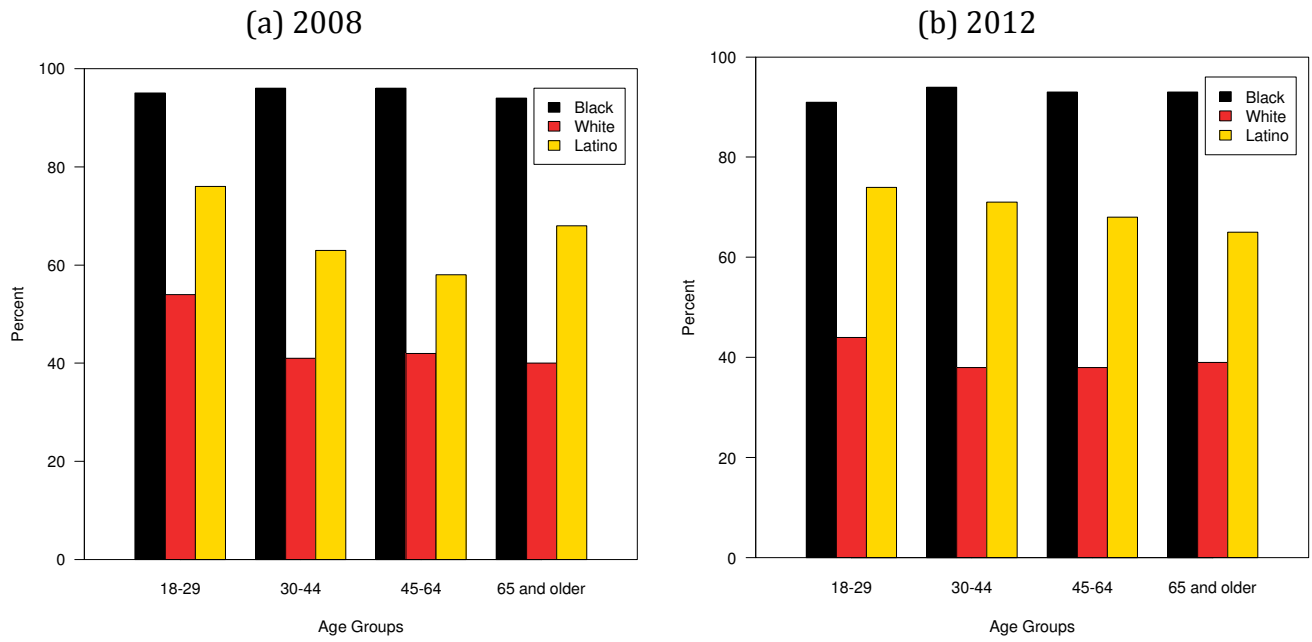
The youth vote is an important component of contemporary electoral politics. Understanding it in its entirety, however, requires understanding how turnout and voice choice patterns vary by racial group, and how these patterns contrast with those for older voters.

Figure 1: Kerry Support by Race and Age (2004)



Source: 2004 National Exit Poll.

Figure 2: Obama Support by Race and Age



Sources: 2008 and 2012 National Exit Polls.