

## The Youth Vote in 2012

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In the 2012 elections, young voters (under age 30) chose Barack Obama over Mitt Romney by 60%-37%, a 23-point margin, according to the National Exit Polls. Obama won the youth vote and lost the over-45 vote in several states, including Ohio, Florida, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. He won those states' electoral votes, which demonstrates the importance of youth voters to the outcome.<sup>1</sup> However, the partisan split in the youth vote was smaller in 2012 than in 2008, when young voters chose Obama over John McCain by 66%-32%. Using the CPS turnout data and National Election Pools exit poll statistics, CIRCLE estimates that approximately 14.8 million voters under 30 cast their votes for Barack Obama in 2008. Only about 12.3 million young voters chose Obama in 2012—a drop of close to 2.4 million votes. Obama received about 3.7 million fewer total votes from all age groups in 2012 than he had in 2008.

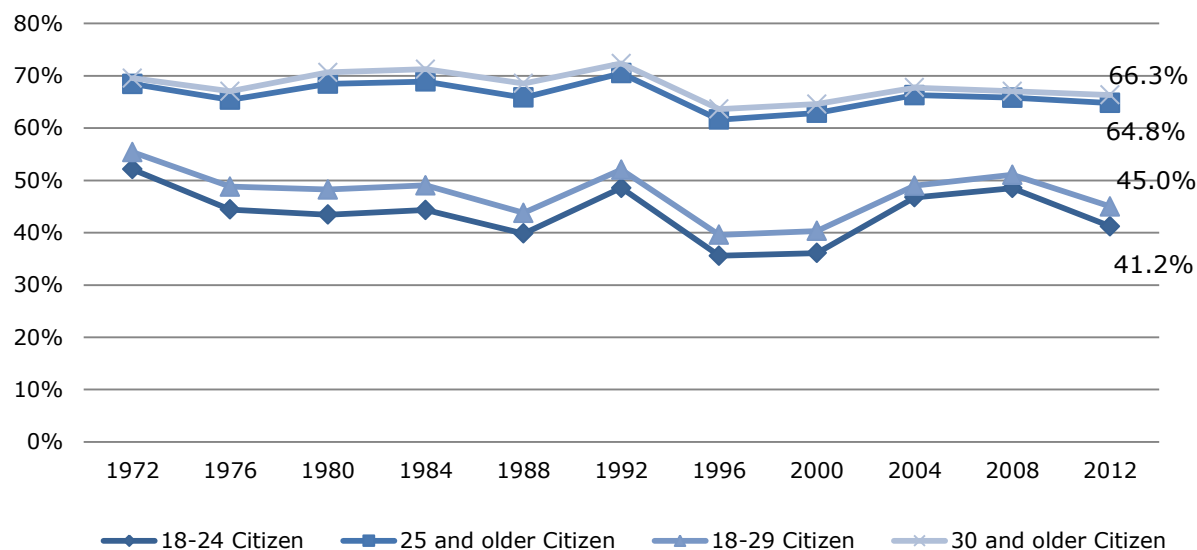
Youth turnout was strong in 2008, compared to the average since 1972, but it fell again in 2012. CIRCLE's final estimates (from the Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, or CPS) suggest that voter turnout in 2012 was 45% for people between the ages of 18-29 and 41.2% for 18-24s. These rates were lower than those observed in the 2004 and 2008 elections, but higher than the rates seen in 1996 and 2000. While young people's turnout dropped by about six percentage points (for the 18-29s), older adults' turnout declined by less than a point. This fact sheet focuses on the turnout trends for all young people and for young people by state.

### *2012 Youth Voter Turnout Rate*

When we discuss the role of young voters in the outcomes of an election, we can describe their impact in several ways. The first and perhaps most useful measure of young voters' influence is their turnout, or the percentage of citizens who did vote. Graph 1 shows the voter turnout rate for young people (ages 18-24 and 18-29) versus older voters (ages 25 plus and 30 plus).

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Source: Census CPS Nov. 1972-2012


**Graph 1: Voter Turnout by Age, 1972-2012**


Source: CIRCLE's tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

Youth voter turnout rose significantly in 2004 and continued to rise in 2008, and young people comprised the age group that exhibited the greatest increase in voter turnout between 2000 and 2008. In 2012, however, youth turnout fell by about six points, while the turnout of people 30 and older declined by 0.7 points overall. See Table 1 for the changes by age group. The turnout for young people (both under-30s and under-25s) has only been lower in three presidential elections—1988, 1996, and 2000—since the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1972.


**Table 1: Voter Turnout Among Citizens November 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012**

	2000	2004	2008	2012	Percentage Point Difference between 2008 and 2012
18-29	40%	49%	51%	45%	-6
30-44	59%	62%	62%	60%	-2
45-64	68%	70%	69%	68%	-1
65+	70%	71%	70%	72%	+2
<i>All Ages</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>62%</i>	<i>-2</i>

Source: CIRCLE's tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

### *Number of Votes Cast in Presidential Elections*

Another way to describe the role of young voters in elections is by directly examining how many votes are cast by members of that age group. Although American democracy relies on ballot anonymity, polls and surveys can give us a good estimate of how many votes are cast by certain groups. According to the CPS, the number of voters under 30 fell by about 1.8 million between 2008 and 2012, whereas the number of voters over the age of 30 rose by about 3.7 million: see Table 2. Note, however, that the CPS is not a precise tool for estimating the number of votes. Actual counts of the ballots cast in 2012 suggest that fewer people voted in 2012 than in 2008<sup>2</sup>, whereas the CPS (a survey of self-reported voting) would suggest that more people voted in 2012.<sup>3</sup>

	<i>All Votes Cast</i>	<i>Votes Cast by 18-24 Year Olds</i>	<i>Votes Cast by Voters 25 and Older</i>	<i>Votes Cast by 18-29 Year Olds</i>	<i>Votes Cast by Voters 30 and 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
2008	131,094	12,501	118,593	22,367	108,727
2012	132,948	11,353	121,596	20,539	112,410

Source: CIRCLE's tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

In 2008, using the CPS turnout estimates and the National Exit Polls' results to determine how young people voted, we estimate that approximately 14.8 million under-30s voted for Barack Obama. The same method would suggest that about 12.3 million voted for Obama in 2012, a drop of almost 2.5 million votes. Obama received about 3.7 million fewer total votes in 2012 than in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Youth Share of the Electorate*

A third method of examining young voters' effect on elections is to calculate the proportion of all the votes that were cast by young people. This statistic is affected by two factors: youth turnout and the age structure of the whole population. (Youth share could rise, for example, if turnout remained constant but the population became younger.) Table 3 shows that youth share of all votes cast rose in the 2004 and 2008 elections but fell off in 2012, driven by the decline in turnout.

	<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%	4.4%
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%
2008	12.5%	21.3%	9.5%	17.1%	3.0%	4.2%
2012	12.8%	21.2%	8.5%	15.4%	4.3%	5.8%

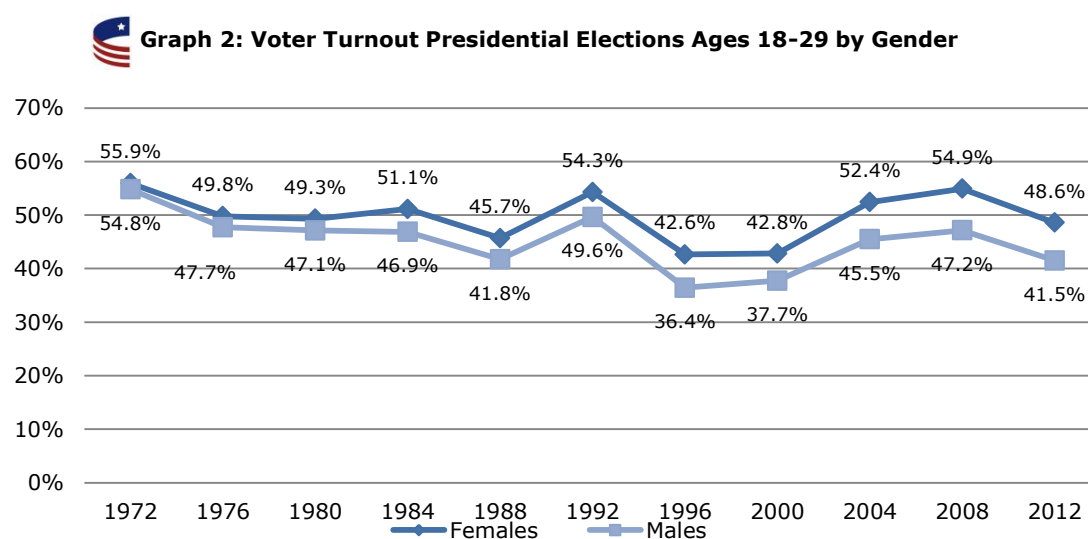
Source: CIRCLE's tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012.

While each of these three methods of describing the impact of America's youngest voters requires a different set of calculations, they all display roughly the same trend—a steady decrease in turnout from 1972 until 2000 with a large spike in 1992, followed by a large increase in turnout starting in 2004 and continuing in 2008, and then a falloff in 2012.

The decline in overall youth voting in 2012 was driven by changes in voter turnout among several different sub-groups within the youth population. The next section examines youth voter turnout rates for women and men, racial and ethnic minorities, and young people of different educational levels.

### ***Young Women Have Become More Likely to Vote than Young Men***

Although in the 1972 general election, men and women were equally likely to go to the polls, over the past thirty years, a gap has emerged in presidential election turnout. By 1992, 54 percent of women ages 18-29 voted while only 50 percent of men did so. In 2012, the gender gap in turnout was 7.1 points (with women ahead). For age 30+, the gender gap was just 2.7%. Young women also have substantially higher levels of educational attainment today.




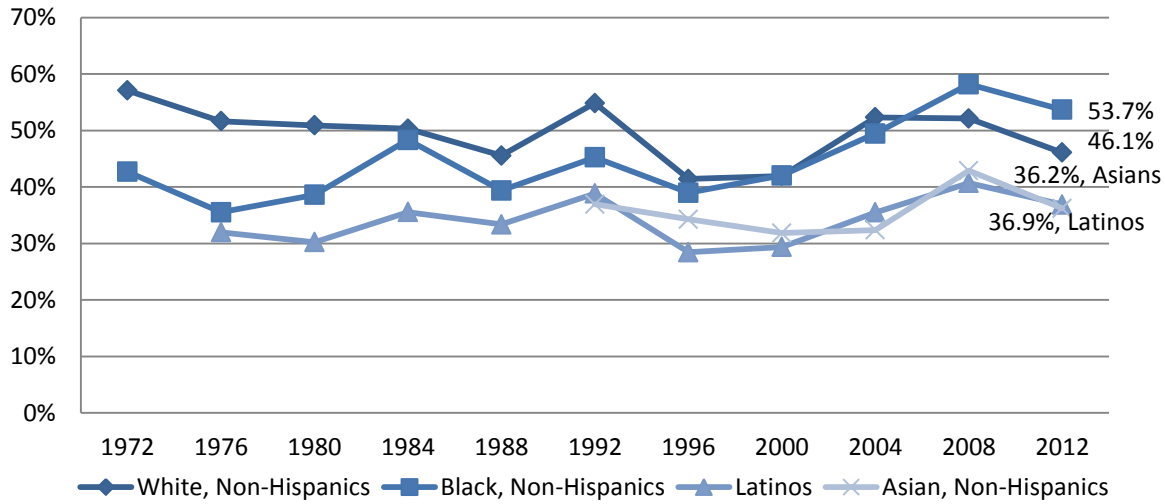
Source: CIRCLE's Tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012.

### ***Participation of Young African Americans Especially Strong in 2012***

African American youth turnout was 53.7% for 18-29s in 2012, much higher than the average rate for young Americans and indeed higher than the rate posted by young White people in any election from 1976-2012, with an exception in 1992. However, African American youth turnout was down by 4.5 percentage points compared to the record-setting rate in 2008. For African Americans age 30 and older, turnout rose in 2012 compared to 2008, by more than 3 points.

Youth turnout for Whites, Asian Americans and Latinos also fell compared to 2008. See graph 3.<sup>5</sup>

 **Graph 3: 18-to-29 Year-Old Citizen Turnout Presidential Elections, by Race 1972-2012**

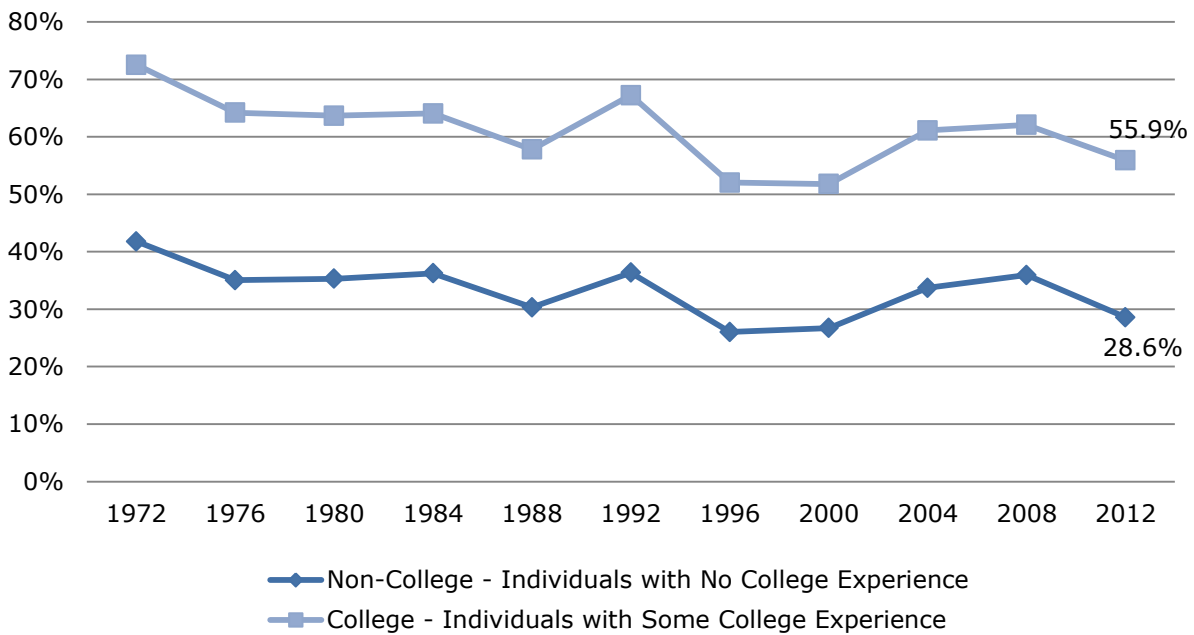


Source: CIRCLE’s tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

***Young People with More Education are More Likely to Vote***

In the 2012 election, young people with college experience were almost twice as likely to vote as those without college experience (55.9% vs. 28.6%).<sup>6</sup> Educational level has long been understood to be a strong predictor of one’s likelihood of voting. More-educated individuals—those who have had at least some college education—have consistently been almost twice as likely to vote as those who have received no more than a high school diploma: see graph 4.

 **Graph 4: 18-to-29 Year-Old Citizen Turnout by Educational Level, Presidential Years**



Source: CIRCLE’s Tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012.


Despite the fact that college attendance has grown since 1972, the turnout gap between these two groups has remained relatively constant.

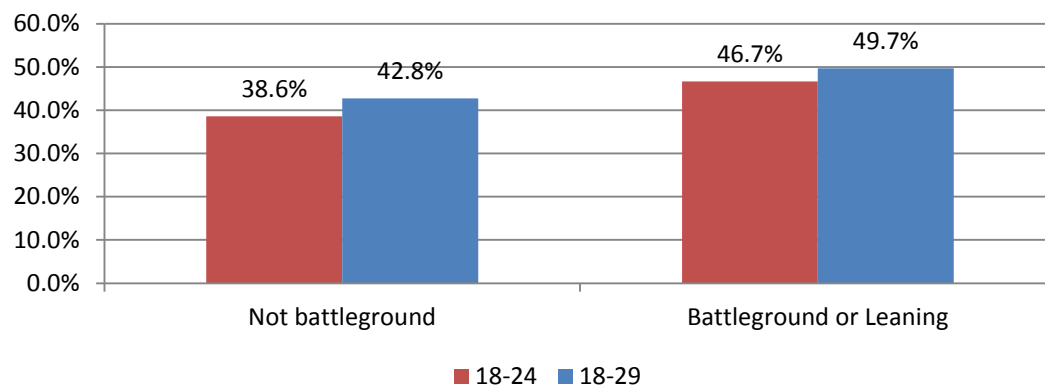
	College	Non-college	Difference
1972	72.5%	41.8%	30.7%
1976	64.2%	35.0%	29.2%
1980	63.7%	35.3%	28.4%
1984	64.1%	36.3%	27.8%
1988	57.8%	30.3%	27.5%
1992	67.2%	36.4%	30.8%
1996	52.0%	26.0%	26.0%
2000	51.8%	26.7%	25.1%
2004	61.1%	33.7%	27.4%
2008	62.1%	35.9%	26.2%
2012	55.9%	28.6%	27.3%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012.

### *Turnout in the Electoral Battleground*

In general, competition among candidates and parties raises youth turnout. Graph 5 shows that youth turnout was higher in competitive ("battleground") states in 2012 than in other states.

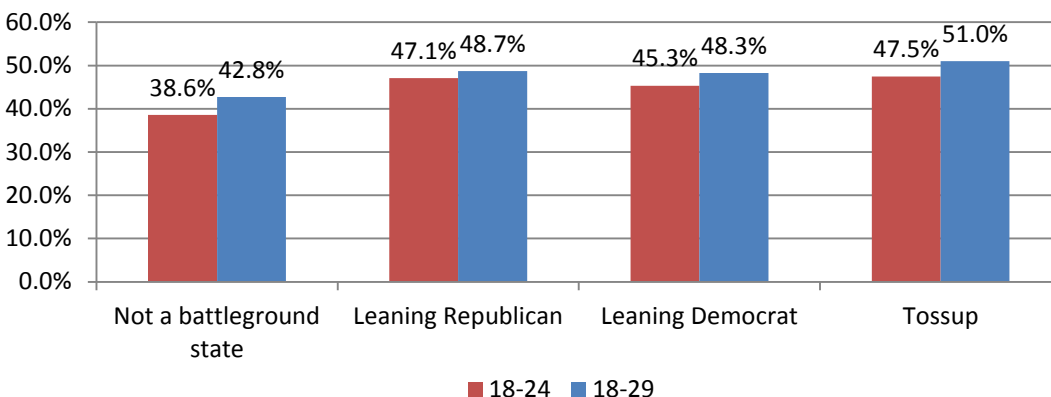
 **Graph 5: Youth Turnout in 2012 Generation Election by Competitiveness of the Race**



Source: CIRCLE's Tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

Graph 6 shows that this pattern was essentially the same whether states leaned Democratic or Republican: what mattered was whether they were competitive between the two parties.

 **Graph 6: Youth Turnout in 2012 Generation Election by Competitiveness of the Race**



Source: CIRCLE's Tabulations from the CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

### *State-by-State Voter Turnout for 2012*

Among the states that had sufficiently large and reliable samples, youth voter turnout was highest in 2012 in Mississippi (68.1%), Wisconsin (58%), Minnesota (57.7%) and Iowa (57.1%). The Upper Midwest has a strong tradition of voting and civic engagement, and several of these states were highly contested in 2012. (Competition generally drives turnout.) Mississippi's high rate—the highest in the nation—is unprecedented, but the sample is small (175 individuals). Voter turnout in 2012 was lowest in West Virginia (23.6%), Oklahoma (27.1%), Texas (29.6%), and Arkansas (30.4%).<sup>7</sup>

In every state except Mississippi, voter turnout among those age 30 and above was at least 10 percentage points higher than turnout among 18-to-29 year-olds. (The District of Columbia also appears to be an exception, but the sample size there is too small for reliable estimates.) South Carolina also had a relatively small gaps between youth and adult turnout rates. See Table 5.

 **Table 5: 2012 State by State Turnout Estimates by Age**

	Ages 18-29	Ages 30 and up	Difference Between Youth and Adult Turnout Rates (in percentage points)
AL	40.3%	67.2%	26.9%
AK*	--	64.4%	--
AZ	38.1%	61.0%	22.8%
AR	30.4%	59.8%	29.4%
CA	43.7%	61.9%	18.1%
CO	55.7%	74.6%	18.9%
CT	43.0%	67.4%	24.4%
DE	46.0%	71.9%	25.9%
DC*	--	78.3%	--
FL	45.8%	64.3%	18.5%
GA	46.8%	65.8%	19.0%
HI	30.5%	56.4%	25.9%
ID	42.7%	69.0%	26.3%
IL	43.8%	66.2%	22.4%
IN	41.1%	63.8%	22.8%
IA	57.1%	72.3%	15.2%
KS	38.3%	70.3%	32.0%
KY	43.8%	63.4%	19.6%

LA	52.8%	69.9%	17.2%
ME	46.6%	73.5%	26.9%
MD	50.1%	69.4%	19.3%
MA	53.5%	75.4%	21.9%
MI	48.5%	71.4%	22.9%
MN	57.7%	77.2%	19.5%
MS	68.1%	76.4%	8.2%
MO	48.5%	67.9%	19.4%
MT	44.6%	71.2%	26.6%
NE	45.1%	65.7%	20.7%
NV	42.5%	62.9%	20.4%
NH	55.6%	72.8%	17.2%
NJ	46.1%	65.7%	19.5%
NM	45.6%	65.8%	20.2%
NY	42.4%	63.4%	21.0%
NC	56.5%	71.9%	15.4%
ND*	--	67.4%	--
OH	50.2%	66.6%	16.4%
OK	27.1%	59.9%	32.8%
OR	51.0%	71.7%	20.7%
PA	46.1%	65.5%	19.4%
RI	47.5%	66.0%	18.6%
SC	55.9%	66.9%	11.0%
SD	36.4%	68.6%	32.2%
TN	42.1%	59.2%	17.0%
TX	29.6%	61.4%	31.8%
UT	40.5%	62.8%	22.2%
VT*	--	68.6%	--
VA	52.1%	70.7%	18.6%
WA	46.5%	70.4%	23.9%
WV	23.6%	53.1%	29.5%
WI	58.0%	77.5%	19.5%
WY*	--	64.6%	--
US	45.0%	66.3%	21.3%

Source: CIRCLE's tabulations from the CPS Nov. Voting and Registration Supplements, 1972-2012

\*Following the CPS voter turnout reporting practice for 2012 for the 18-24 age bracket, we chose not to report age-specific voter turnout for AK, DC, ND, VT and WY due to large margins of error.

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.htm>



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> CIRCLE “At Least 80 Electoral Votes Depended on Youth,” Nov 7, 2012, <http://www.civicyouth.org/at-least-80-electoral-votes-depended-on-youth/>

<sup>2</sup> According to the official vote tallies provided by the U.S. House of Representatives Archive (<http://history.house.gov/Institution/Election-Statistics/Election-Statistics/>), President Obama won 69,498,459 votes in 2008 and 65,752,017 votes in 2012, which represents a net loss of approximately 3.75 million votes. There was a small decline in the total vote tallies: a total of 131,406,895 votes were cast in 2008, and 129,139,997 votes were cast in 2012 Presidential election.

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<sup>4</sup> According to U.S. House of Representatives Archive, President Obama won 69,498,459 votes in 2008 and 65,752,017 votes in 2012, which represents a net loss of approximately 3.75 million votes.

<sup>5</sup> We have defined racial/ethnic groups in the 2012 CPS November Supplements by defining anyone with Hispanic background as Latino, single race or ethnicity individuals who are non-Hispanic as white, African American, Asian American or Native American, and those of mixed race/ethnicity as a separate category. Since 2003, the CPS has allowed survey participants to mark more than once racial/ethnic category in describing their backgrounds. This potentially means that data from 2000 and earlier and 2004 and later may not be entirely comparable when identifying race and ethnicity categories of survey respondents. Furthermore, the estimates for Native American youth and mixed-race/Other youth are not reported due to small sample sizes. All programs used to generate race and ethnicity variables are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>6</sup> Individuals with college experience have a high school diploma and have attended, but not necessarily completed, college, technical school, or community college. The CPS also allows for calculation of turnout among young people who are currently enrolled in college, for 18-24 year olds. The turnout rate of those who are currently enrolled in college in 2012 was 52.7%, down from 59.7% in 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Several states have not been reported because, due to their small populations and sample sizes, CPS must collapse more than one age group in order to increase the number of publishable estimates. Therefore, we have followed the CPS model and have not reported turnout in states where the youth sample must be combined with other age groups.