



## Partisanship: A Lifelong Loyalty that Develops Early

### Party identification develops in early adulthood. The youth voting years are crucial.

Several studies and electoral history show that partisanship develops in early adulthood—the youth vote years.

Young adults are more likely than older adults to identify as Independent, a commonsense situation for a group of voters new to politics. Young voters' high rate of independence has been true throughout modern American political history. *The American Voter* noted in 1964 that "Young people, just entering the electorate, are more likely than any of the older age groups to call themselves Independents." Today, about one-third of young adults identify as Independent. (see table)

	GQRR	YVS	RTS	Pew	QPI	IOP
% Young ID Democrat	41	40	27	34	29	35
% Young ID Republican	31	30	28	22	23	27
% Young ID Independent	27	23	37	39	37	39
Percent of young adults identifying Democrat, Republican, Independent in 2006 <sup>1</sup>						

Further, academic studies support the "impressionable years" hypothesis, which suggests that young adults' political beliefs are less formed and stable than older adults and, therefore, open to outreach from political parties, interest groups, and others.

Studies also clarify that this is an aging, not a period, effect:

- "After students reached their thirties...their attitudes had become as stable as their parents' attitudes."<sup>2</sup>
- "...all older cohorts in each study had substantially more stable party identifications than did the youngest cohort. The youngest cohort in the first study also showed greatly increased stability in the second study, when it was 16 years older." (Alwin 1993).

Clearly, early adulthood is a time when partisan leanings are forming. Young adults are ripe for outreach from political parties and organizations.

### A person's party identification, once formed in early adulthood, remains remarkably stable over a lifetime.

*"It is apparent from these various pieces of evidence that identification with political parties, once established, is an attachment which is not easily changed."* *The American Voter*, pg. 86

Studies beginning in the 1950s show that partisan identification is a very stable attribute over the course of a voter's life. More recently, academic studies from the 1990s confirm this, and an analysis of exit polls from 1972 to 2006 show how the partisanship of each generation's youth vote make a significant political impact over time.

The most extensive longitudinal study of electoral habits, the National Election Studies in the 1950s and 1970s, found that "Party identification was the most stable attitude measured...indeed almost perfectly stable."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 18-29 year olds' poll responses, March to June 2006, N=575; Young Voter Battleground Poll of 18-30 year olds, November 2-8, 2006, N=500, margin of error +/-4.4%; Cook Political Report/RT Strategies Poll: 18-34 year olds responses, October 26-29, 2006. 18-34 year old N=442; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, summer 2006 polls; Quinnipiac Polling Institute: 18-34 year olds responses, June 2006 survey. 18-34 year old N=460; Harvard University Institute of Politics, Fall 2006 Survey of Political Attitudes, N=2,546 18-24 year olds, margin of error +/-1.9%.

<sup>2</sup> Sears, D.O., and Levy, S. (2003). *Childhood and adult political development*. In D.O. Sears, L. Huddy, & R. Jervis (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. (pp.60-109). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In 1964, the seminal work on this issue, *The American Voter*, echoes this point: the authors note that "...persons who identify with one of the parties typically have held the same partisan tie for all or almost all of their adult lives."<sup>4</sup>

- "When we ask people to recall their first presidential vote, for example, we discover that of those who can remember their vote for President two-thirds still identify with the same party they first voted for."
- "A majority (56 per cent) of these presidential voters have never crossed party lines."<sup>5</sup>

Additional studies published in the 1990s bolster the finding that partisan identification is a remarkably stable factor over a voters' life.<sup>6</sup>

Partisan identification is, of course, not immovable; various factors, including candidate quality, major events (i.e. Watergate), and social factors (i.e. job loss, marriage) can move a voter to one party or another.

However, as noted in *The American Voter*, "[Partisanship is] a picture characterized more by stability than by change—not by a rigid, immutable fixation on one party rather than the other, but by a persistent adherence and a resistance to contrary influence."<sup>7</sup>

### **Get them while they're young, and you'll have a dependable voting bloc for life.**

Norman J. Ornstein, writing of the youth vote in 1986, said, "Young people are considerably less anchored to parties than their parents. It takes a while--several elections--to convert patterns into enduring habits... Young voters, then, are the prize... Many Republicans believe that if they can hold the young voters in 1986, they will have built a substantial and long-lasting base."<sup>8</sup>

Track the rise and fall of America's political parties and you'll see a remarkable trend develop: those who win the youth vote are, a generation later, the party in power. As noted by Ornstein in 1986:

"All the research done on the dramatic Democratic realignment of the 1930s shows that the key was young voters, coming of age as the Depression hit, influenced deeply by the contrast between Hoover and Roosevelt... those young voters became lifelong Democrats... The oldest segment of today's population, those who came of age during the golden years for the Republicans (the Roaring Twenties), remain staunchly Republican today."<sup>9</sup>

If we pick up where Ornstein left off and track the 1980s youth vote to the 2004 presidential election, we find that the trend continues. From a 1984 Time Magazine article, "Reagan's Youthful Boomlet:"

"Republican National Committee Chairman Frank Fahrenkopf points out that few voters ever change their party affiliation and that this inertia has benefited Democrats since the 1930s. Insists Fahrenkopf: 'Now young people are registering Republican, and they won't be easy to change either.'"

Turns out Fahrenkopf and Ornstein were right. Republicans won the youth vote hands down in 1984<sup>10</sup> and again in 1988<sup>11</sup>; even in 1986, when Democrats won every age group in the U.S. House vote, young adults (18-29) were more Republican-leaning than any other age group.<sup>12</sup>

Today, those young voters are now the middle-aged core of the Republican Party. Twenty years later, those "youth" voters are in their 40s and still sharply Republican compared to other age cohorts.<sup>13</sup> This group of

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, A., Converse, P., Miller, W., and Stokes, D. *The American Voter*, Survey Research Center, The University of Michigan, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, et al., p. 87

<sup>6</sup> Green, D., Yale University, Palmquist, B., Harvard University, *Political Behavior*, Volume 16, Number 4 / December, 1994, 437-466; Jennings, M.K., & Stoke, L. *The persistence of the past*, April 1999, Midwest Political Science Association Convention, Chicago.

<sup>7</sup>Campbell, et al., p. 86

<sup>8</sup>"The Curse of the Six-Year Itch," *Atlantic Monthly*, by Norman Ornstein, March 1986. [www.theatlantic.com/politics/polibig/ornstein.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/polibig/ornstein.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> 59% of 18-29 year olds voted for Reagan, 40% Mondale: [www.nytimes.com/images/2000/12/20/politics/elections/nwr\\_portrait\\_age.html](http://www.nytimes.com/images/2000/12/20/politics/elections/nwr_portrait_age.html)

<sup>11</sup> 52% of 18-29 year olds voted for Bush, 47% for Dukakis: [www.nytimes.com/images/2000/12/20/politics/elections/nwr\\_portrait\\_age.html](http://www.nytimes.com/images/2000/12/20/politics/elections/nwr_portrait_age.html)

<sup>12</sup> CBS News/ New York Times: National Election Day Exit Poll, 1986. 18-29 year olds voted 48.4% for Democrats, 46.0% for Republicans.

voters played a significant role in the Republican revolution in the early 1990s when Republicans secured—and kept, until 2006—a stronghold in Congress.

### **What this means for partisans today**

Currently, young voters are moving toward the inverse of what happened with the youth of the 1980s. In 2004, young adults were the only age bracket Democrat John Kerry won over George W. Bush (54-45) and in 2006, young adults gave Democrats the largest margin of victory of any age group, voting 60-38 in favor of Democrats in Congressional races (compared to the overall electorate's 53-45 split in favor of Democrats).<sup>14</sup>

For Democrats, this presents an enormous opportunity to win over the currently 42 million 18-29 year old citizens. Two elections on track to becoming a Democratic generation, 2008 could make or break the party's hold on the electorate. However, it's telling that so many of those youth do still identify as Independent, even into their late 20s, and should be motivation to Democrats to spend time and resources mobilizing young adults.

For Republicans, the past two elections should spur them to devote resources to stemming the flow of today's youth to the Democratic Party. Not all young adults vote Democratic, and plenty of those who did in 2006 are not yet wed to the party. In 2008 and beyond, Republicans should develop a strategy to win back many of those young voters and build their party for the future.

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**Young Voter Strategies**, a nonpartisan project in partnership with the Graduate School of Political Management at The George Washington University, provides the public, parties, candidates, consultants and nonprofits with data and research on the youth vote as well as best practices to effectively mobilize young people.

For more information, including the latest opinion polling, demographic research, and campaign toolkits, visit [www.youngvoterstrategies.org](http://www.youngvoterstrategies.org)

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<sup>13</sup> In 2004, 30-44 year olds voted 53-46 in favor of George W. Bush, more Republican-leaning than any age group except those 60 years and over (54-46 Bush over Kerry). Source: National Election Pool Exit Poll, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> National Election Pool U.S. House of Representatives Exit Poll, 2006