



DEMOCRACY REMIXED: BLACK YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

A Series on Black Youth Political Engagement and the 2012 Election

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Historic Turnout among Black Youth in 2004 and 2008

As we approach the 2012 election, it is important to remember some very important facts about the last presidential election in 2008. In this fact sheet, we discuss the following:

- Youth voter turnout in 2008 reached a historic high, and was driven largely by increases in turnout among young blacks and Latinos.
- It may be difficult for the Obama campaign to replicate the mobilization efforts that it unleashed in 2008, which were instrumental to generating higher turnout among young blacks.
- Given the historic context of the 2008 election, both because of record levels of turnout and the first black major-party presidential candidate, community organizations and funders will play a critical role in promoting voter turnout among black youth in the 2012 election.

Historical Differences in Black and White Youth Voter Turnout

As table 1 shows, data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that 52 percent of black youth (and 55 percent of black citizens) between the aged of 18 and 24 voted in 2008. This is the highest turnout rate among 18–24-year-olds of any racial or ethnic group since eighteen-year-olds received the right to vote. In addition it marks the first time a majority of black youth aged 18–24 participated in any

national election. Young black women aged 18–24 reported voting at higher rates than did young black men, with 60 percent of black female citizens and 57 percent of black females aged 18–24 going to the polls. Among young black men aged 18–24, 51 percent of citizens and 48 percent of all black males voted in 2008.



President Obama greets black youth during the 2008 South Carolina presidential primary campaign. Photo credit: The Associated Press.

Table 1: Voter Turnout among Youth (ages 18–24), 1972–2008

Year	Black (%)	White (%)	Latino (%)
1972	34.7	51.9	30.9
1976	27.9	44.7	31.8
1980	30.1	41.8	15.9
1984	40.6	41.6	21.9
1988	35.0	37.0	16.8
1992	36.6	45.4	17.6
1996	32.4	33.3	15.1
2000	33.9	33.0	15.4
2004	44.0	42.6	20.4
2008	52.3	43.8	27.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008,” May 2010, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2012).

Although the media like to talk about something called “the youth vote,” the differences in turnout among young people of different racial and ethnic identities in 2008 is part of an ongoing, historical trend of differences in turnout and vote choice among young people. There have always been important racial disparities in levels of youth turnout making the idea of a homogenous youth vote more of a media myth than reality. For instance, as table 1 shows, in 1972, 52 percent of white youth voted, compared to only 35 percent of black youth and 31 percent of Latino youth. Since that high point, turnout declined across all three racial groups until 2004. Interestingly, the decline has been steepest among young white voters, with the gap in voting between black and white young adults shrinking since 1984,



Jesse Jackson greets supporters during his campaign for the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination. Photo credit: The History Channel.

when Jesse Jackson ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, which mobilized black and Latino youth to the polls.

Despite the general decline, there have been upswings in youth turnout. The election of Bill Clinton was facilitated in part by the fact that 43 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds voted. However, most of that surge was driven by the 8 percentage point increase in voting among white youth, up from 37 percent in 1988 to 45 percent in 1992. In contrast, black

and Latino youth in 1992 increased their turnout only by 1 to 2 percent, compared to 1988. Thus, contrary to the narrative that 1992 was a high point for youth voting, it was actually only a high point for white youth voting and marked the reemergence of racial disparities in voting among blacks, whites, and Latinos that had attenuated since 1984.

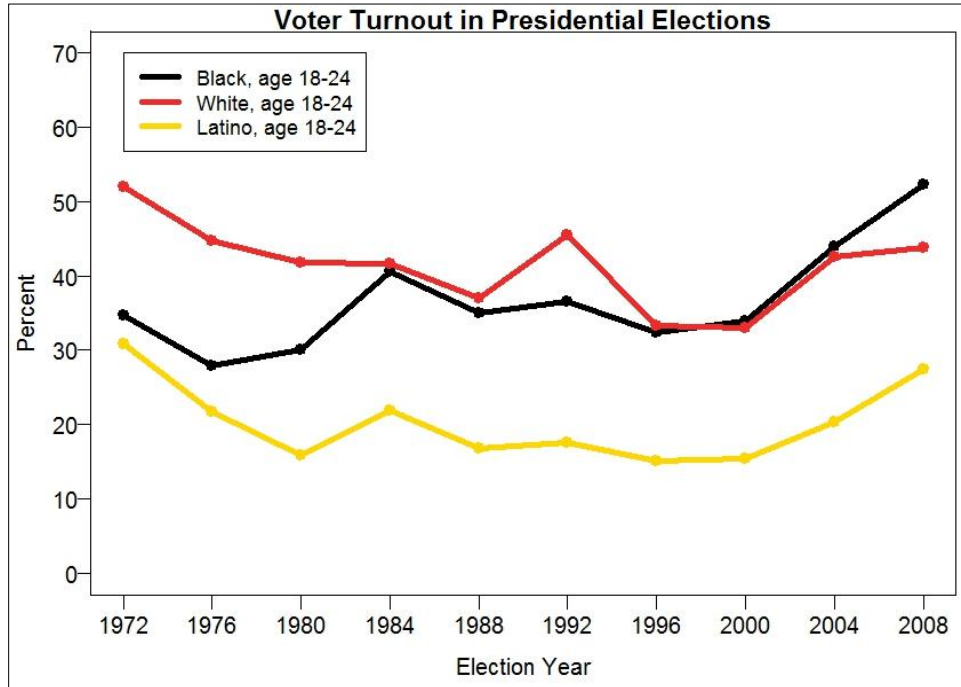
By 2004, however, racial patterns of turnout shifted significantly. Young black Americans turned out at record high levels in 2004 and 2008. Turnout among young white Americans rebounded substantially from their low levels in 1996 and 2000, but voting rates remained significantly lower than they were in the 1970s and early 1980s. Among Latinos, turnout rates were nearly what they were in 1972 but remained considerably lower than the turnout levels of blacks and whites.



Bill Clinton's candidacy in 1992 attracted a larger increase in turnout among white youth than among black youth. Photo credit: The Oregonian.

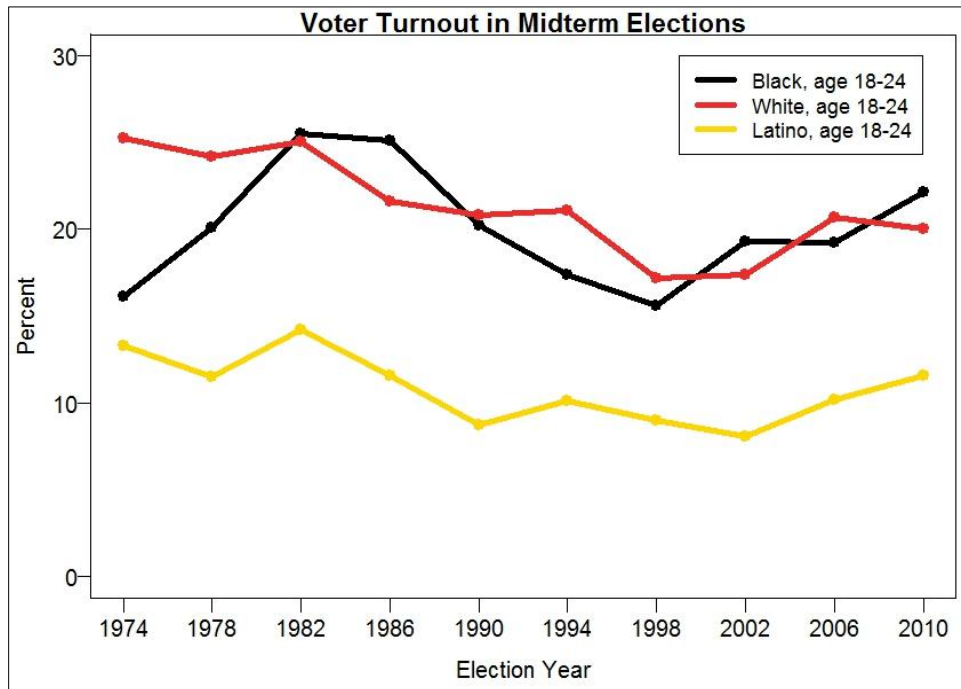
As figures 1 and 2 show, these patterns are not confined to presidential elections. Youth voter turnout in midterm elections is even lower, and the racial disparities in turnout patterns persist. Along with elections for the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, 37 states hold gubernatorial elections in midterm years, and most states also elect members of the state legislature during these same years. These low levels of voter turnout present a key opportunity for young people to increase their share of influence in governmental decision-making.

Figure 1: Turnout among Youth (Ages 18 to 24), 1972–2008



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2010,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/historical/tabA-1.xls> (accessed July 7, 2011).

Figure 2: Turnout among Youth (Ages 18 to 24), 1974–2010

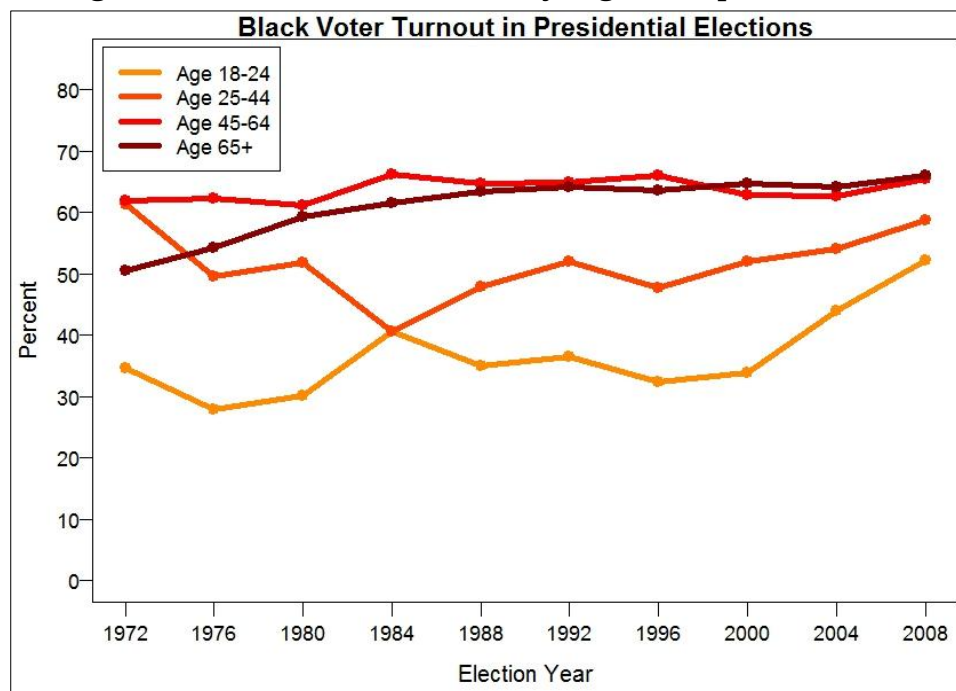


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2010,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/historical/tabA-1.xls> (accessed July 7, 2011).

Black Voter Turnout by Age

Black voter turnout over the last four decades has been characterized by both change and continuity, particularly when examining these trends by age group. Figure 3 shows levels of black voter turnout by age group. Since 1980, turnout among blacks aged 45–64 and 65 and older has been nearly identical, holding steady at just about 60 percent. There was a slight increase in turnout among the 45–64 age group in 1984, when Jesse Jackson first sought the presidential nomination, but for the most part, turnout levels for these age groups have been remarkably stable over this time period. Even in 2008, voter turnout for these age groups increased only modestly.

Figure 3: Black Voter Turnout by Age Group, 1972–2008



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Reported Voting and Registration by Race, Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age Groups: November 1964 to 2010,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/historical/tabA-1.xls> (accessed July 7, 2011).

Turnout for the younger age groups, however, is more variable. Almost without exception, blacks aged 18–24 and 25–44 turned out at lower levels than the older age groups across this time period. This difference in turnout between younger and

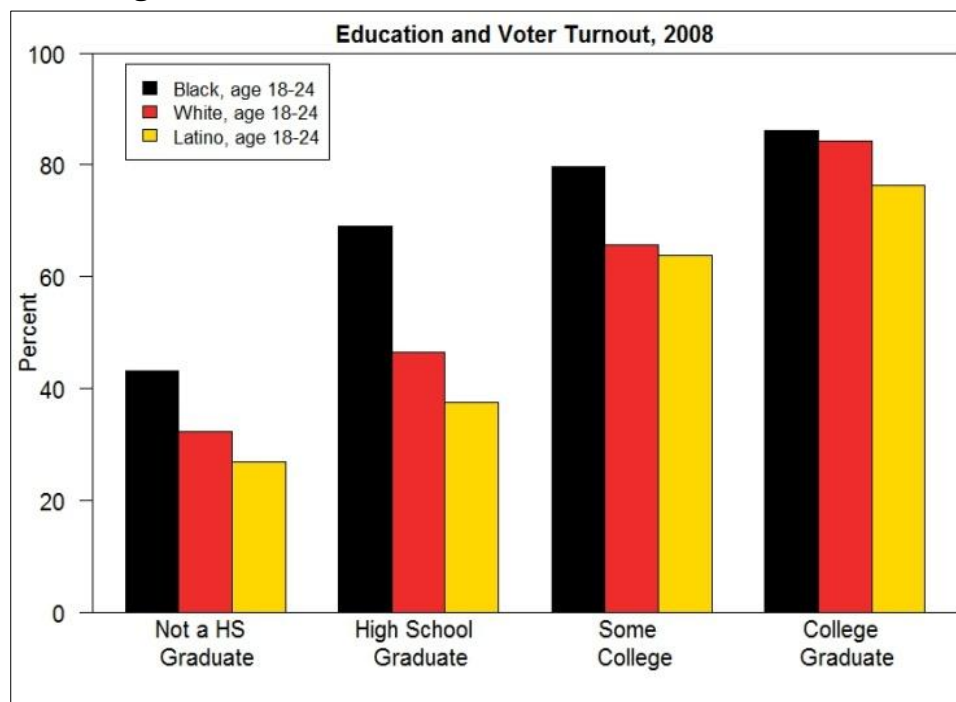
older age groups is not specific to black communities; it can be found in any racial or ethnic group. Turnout among blacks aged 25–44 dropped approximately 20 percentage points from 1972 to 1984 but has steadily increased since then. The turnout gap between this age group and the older age groups closed to within a few percentage points in 2008. Among the youngest age group, 18–24, turnout remained fairly stable for most of this time period until 2004 and 2008, when it increased sharply. As mentioned above, black youth aged 18–24 turned out at record levels in 2004 and again in 2008, significantly closing the turnout gap between them and older voters. However, even with unprecedented levels of mobilization activities targeted at young black voters in 2008, this age group still turned out at a rate 10 percentage points lower than that for blacks aged 45–64 and 65 and older.

Demographic Differences in Youth Voter Turnout, 2008

Education

Our analysis of turnout in the 2008 presidential election shows that education, income, and gender are all important sources of variation in youth turnout. As figure 4 shows, turnout rates increase with education level for youth in every racial group. Among black youth, the biggest difference is between people who have not completed high school versus those who have a high school diploma. High school graduates turned out at a rate 20 percentage points higher than nongraduates. Additionally, racial disparities in turnout were smallest among college graduates, among whom 76 percent of Latinos, 84 percent of whites, 86 percent of blacks turned out to vote in the 2008 election.

Figure 4: Education and Youth Voter Turnout, 2008



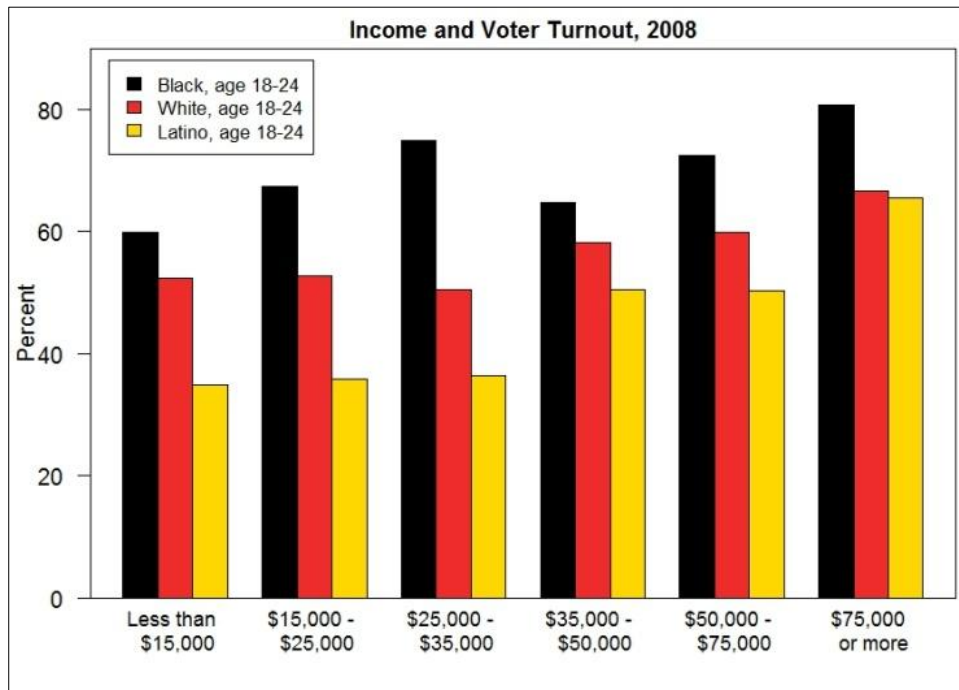
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey, November 2008 Voting and Registration Supplement File,” <http://www.census.gov/apsd/techdoc/cps/cpsnov08.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2012).

Income

Income is also strongly related to voter turnout, but the relationship is slightly more complicated. Generally speaking, higher income groups vote at higher rates than do lower income groups. But this varies considerably by race, as figure 5 shows. The turnout rate was 60 percent for the poorest black youth—those whose household incomes are less than \$15,000. Youth in every other income category voted at higher rates, up to 81 percent for the most affluent black youth (household incomes of \$75,000 or more). The data tell a similar story for Latino youth; 35 percent of Latinos in the lowest income category voted, compared with 65 percent of Latinos in the top income group. Levels of turnout among white youth, however, are much less sensitive to income. Fifty-three percent of white youth from poor households turned out to vote, and only among whites from the top income category did turnout exceed 60 percent. Remembering that the 2008 election featured historic levels of turnout from this age group, especially among racial minority groups, these data suggest that continued income disparities

between racial groups are likely to contribute to distinct racial patterns of turnout among youth.

Figure 5: Income and Youth Voter Turnout, 2008

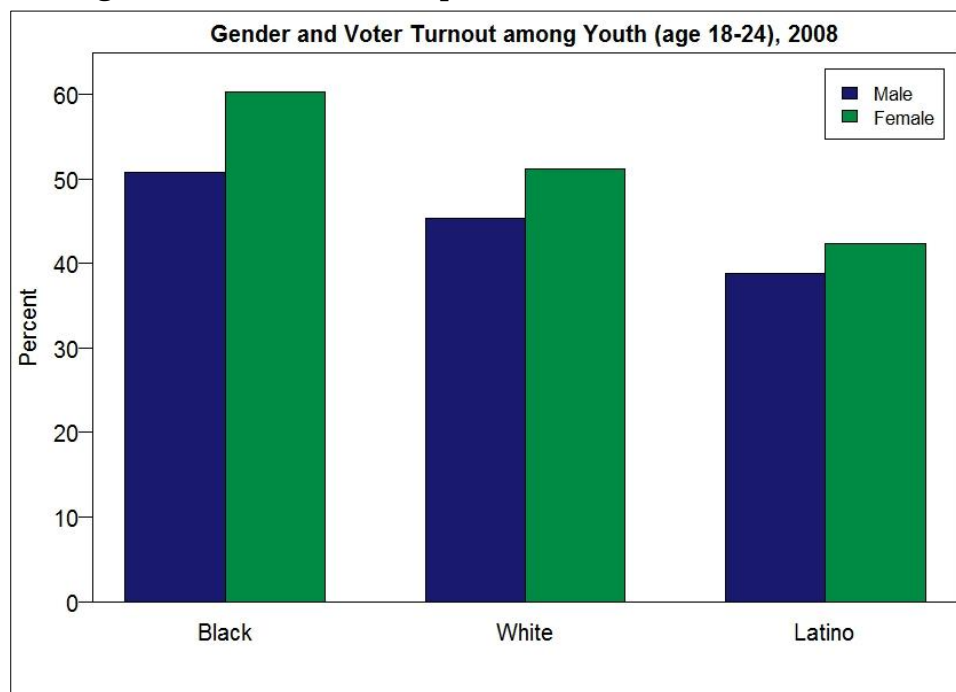


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, November 2008 Voting and Registration Supplement File," <http://www.census.gov/aprd/techdoc/cps/cpsnov08.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2012).

Gender

There has long been a gender gap in voter turnout in the United States, in which women turn out at higher rates than men. As figure 6 shows, this is also true among young people. However, the size of the gender gap varies considerably by race. The gender gap is smallest among Latinos: 39 percent of Latino men voted in 2008, compared with 42 percent of Latina women. The disparity is slightly larger among white youth, among whom 45 percent of men and 51 percent of women turned out to vote. The gender gap is substantially larger among black youth, however. More than 60 percent of black women in this age group turned out to vote, compared with 50 percent of young black men.

Figure 6: The Gender Gap in Youth Voter Turnout, 2008



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, “Current Population Survey, November 2008 Voting and Registration Supplement File,” <http://www.census.gov/aprd/techdoc/cps/cpsnov08.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2012).

Changing Demographics in the U.S. Electorate

The changing demographics of the American population suggest that these racial disparities in turnout among youth are especially pressing. In addition to recently flexing their voting power, black and Latino youth have also expanded their overall numbers. They now comprise a larger percentage of the youth population. In 1990, black youth comprised 13.8 percent of the youth population between the ages of 18 and 24, and Latino youth made up just under 12 percent of the youth population. By 2010, however, black youth accounted for 15.4 percent of the total youth population, and Latino youth accounted for 18.8 percent. The share of nonwhite voters is projected to continue to grow, and by 2015 a full 37.4 percent of the population aged 18–24 is likely to be either black or Latino. Thus, a complete story of voter turnout and its potential to influence electoral outcomes and policymaking must account for the increasing importance of the votes of young people of color as well as racial disparities in levels of turnout.

Looking Ahead to 2012

The promising news is that in 2008, more youth—especially black and Latino youth—refused to be silent. In record numbers, they voted, worked on campaigns, and intensely followed Barack Obama’s battle to win the White House. In some ways, the upswing in youth political engagement that corresponded with the 2008 election resembled something of a movement more than it was electoral politics as usual. The enthusiasm and interest that the campaign generated among young people recalled the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that were oriented around civil rights and the antiwar movement and were led primarily by young people in the days when 18-year-olds were unable to participate in electoral politics.

But since candidate Obama became President Obama, young people, including black youth, do not seem currently to have the same attachment to campaign and candidate that we witnessed during 2008. Instead, the news today is filled with stories of young people, including some black youth, taking over Wall Street and financial centers across the country and the world to protest what they see as the greed of the financial sector and the inaction of the government, including the Obama administration. So a key question that emerges from reviewing the data and our current political context is whether the record levels of participation displayed during the 2008 election can be recaptured for 2012.

We know that part of the reason for the historic turnout among young blacks in 2008 was the money allocated to mobilizing these young people. In addition to the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign, community organizations, hip hop artists, and social media also helped to mobilize and energize black youth in 2008.

Will the campaigns and parties once again invest in black youth and their political participation? Are funders prepared to direct money to poor and marginal populations so that community groups can facilitate the participation of young people, especially young people of color? Many youth of color are likely to be disappointed with Obama’s performance in office during his first term, especially because of the unrealistically lofty expectations that accompanied his 2008 victory. Given this backdrop, will America’s youth participate at similar levels in 2012? What will it take to reengage and reenergize these communities?