



# 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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## Youth, Race, and Partisanship

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

- Overall, youth are far less supportive of Democratic candidates than is typically reported by the media.
- Black youth have provided the highest and most consistent levels of support for the Democratic Party and its candidates of any racial youth group.
- Historically, black youth have supported Democrats at lower rates than older blacks, but more recently these gaps have disappeared.
- Latino youth demonstrated the largest increase in support for Democratic candidates in 2008.
- While Democratic support among white and Latino youth varies considerably by education, income, and gender, black youth demonstrate consistently high levels of Democratic support across all demographic categories.

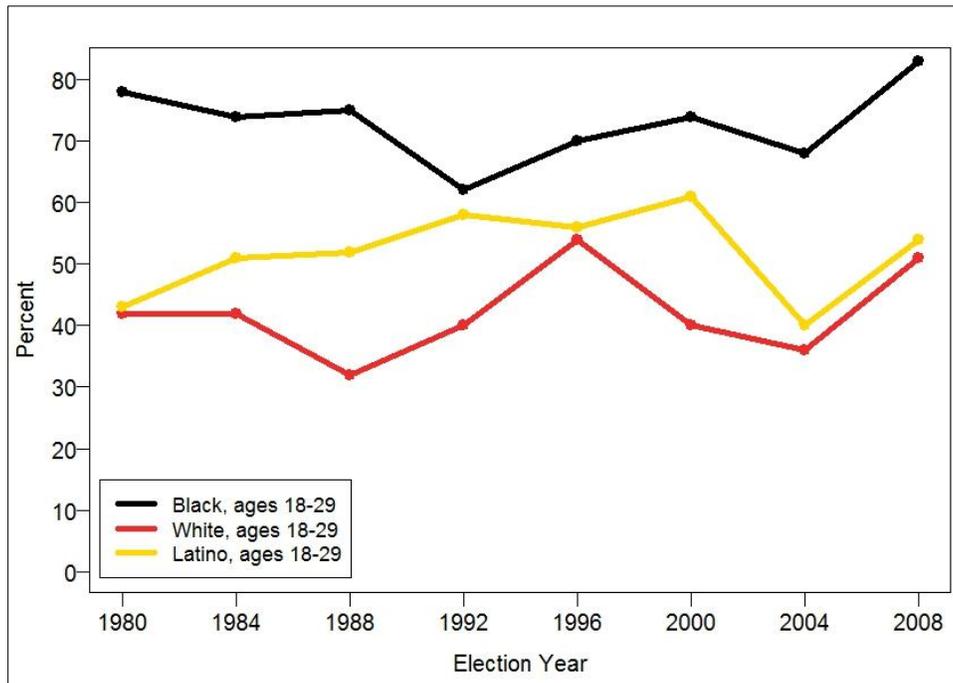
## Historical Trends in Youth Partisanship

Young voters are often believed to be overwhelmingly Democratic. However, this is not the case historically, nor is it true in the contemporary period. Figure 1 shows the percentage of youth (ages 18–29) from 1980 to 2008 that have identified themselves as Democrats. Black youth have been the most Democratic group over

this time period and have steadily become more Democratic since 1992. In 2008, more than 80 percent of black youth identified themselves as Democrats.

The percentage of Democrats is much lower for white and Latino youth, however. For the most part, about 50 percent of Latino youth have aligned with the Democratic Party, while slightly fewer white youth call themselves Democrats. There do not appear to be any particular trends among white and Latino youth. White youth were more Democratic in 1992 and 1996, compared with earlier years, but these numbers decreased during the George W. Bush presidency. In 2008, roughly equal percentages (just over 50 percent) of white and Latino youth identified as Democrats.

Figure 1: Democratic Party Identification among Youth (Ages 18–29), 1980–2008

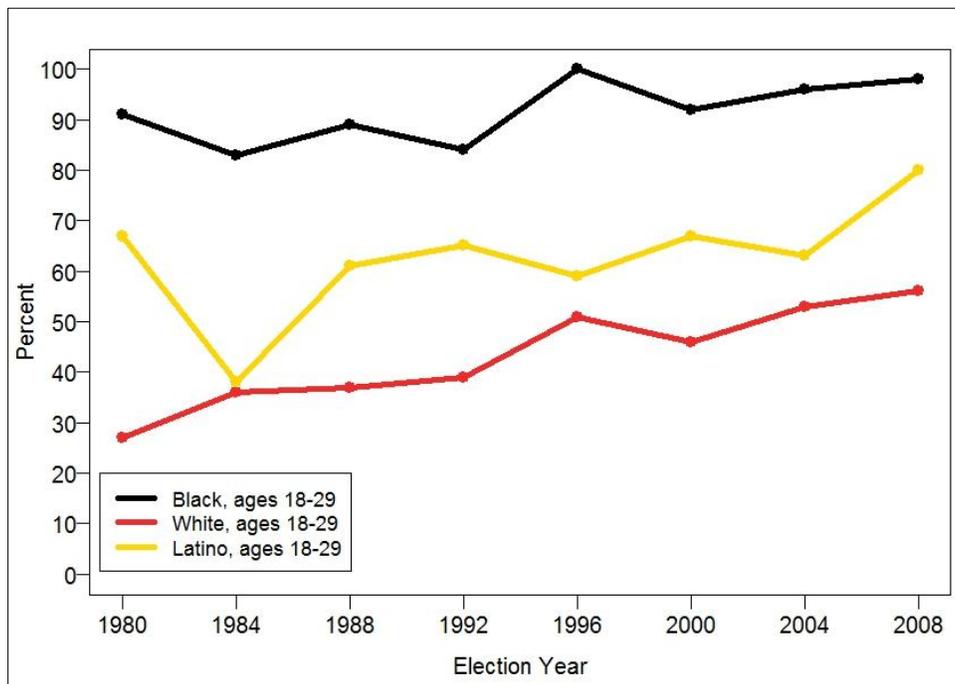


Source: American National Election Studies (available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>).

Looking back at voting behavior in presidential elections, similar patterns emerge. As figure 2 shows, more than 80 percent of black youth have voted for Democratic presidential candidates in every year since 1980. More recently, Democratic presidential candidates have received support from more than 90 percent of black youth in every election since 1996.

White and Latino youth increasingly supported Democratic presidential candidates during this time period. Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush were supported by more than 60 percent of white youth in the 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992 presidential elections. Since then, however, a majority of white youth have supported the Democratic presidential candidate in every election cycle with the exception of 2000, in which only 46 percent of white youth voted for Al Gore. Among Latinos, the trend has been rather steady since 1984. More than 60 percent of Latino youth voted for the Democratic candidate in every presidential election since 1988, except for 1996, in which 59 percent voted for Bill Clinton. Eighty percent of Latino youth voted for Barack Obama in 2008, the highest rate of Democratic voting behavior among Latinos during this time period.

Figure 2: Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates among Youth (Ages 18–29), 1980–2008

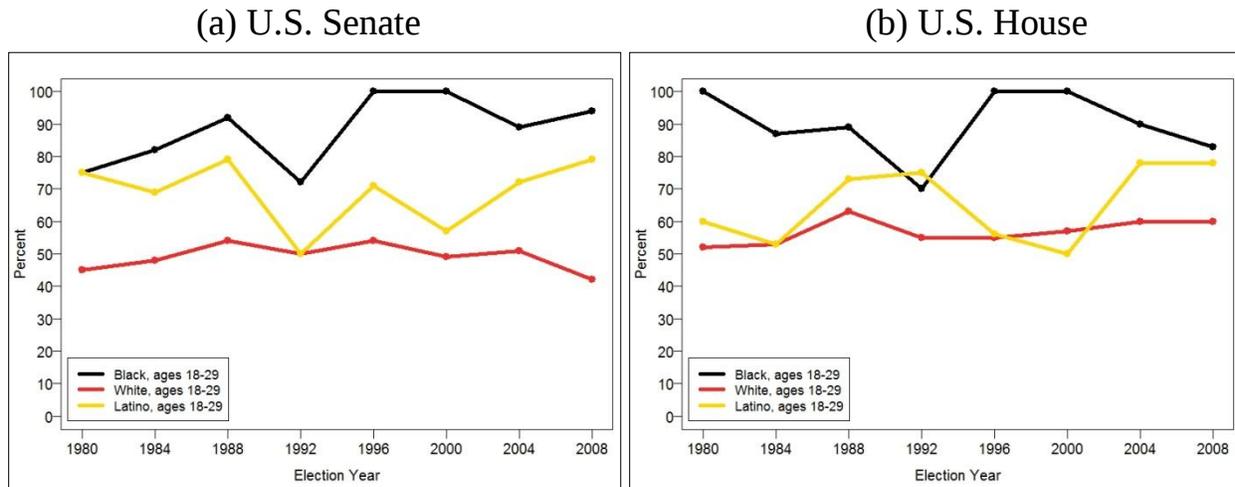


Source: American National Election Studies (available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>).

As figures 3a and 3b show, we find similar patterns when looking at youth support for Democratic congressional candidates. Black youth, followed by Latinos, provide the highest levels of support for Democratic candidates in these races.

White youth, however, tend to split their votes fairly evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates, and this pattern has been rather consistent since 1980.

Figure 3: Support for Democratic Congressional Candidates among Youth (Ages 18–29), 1980–2008

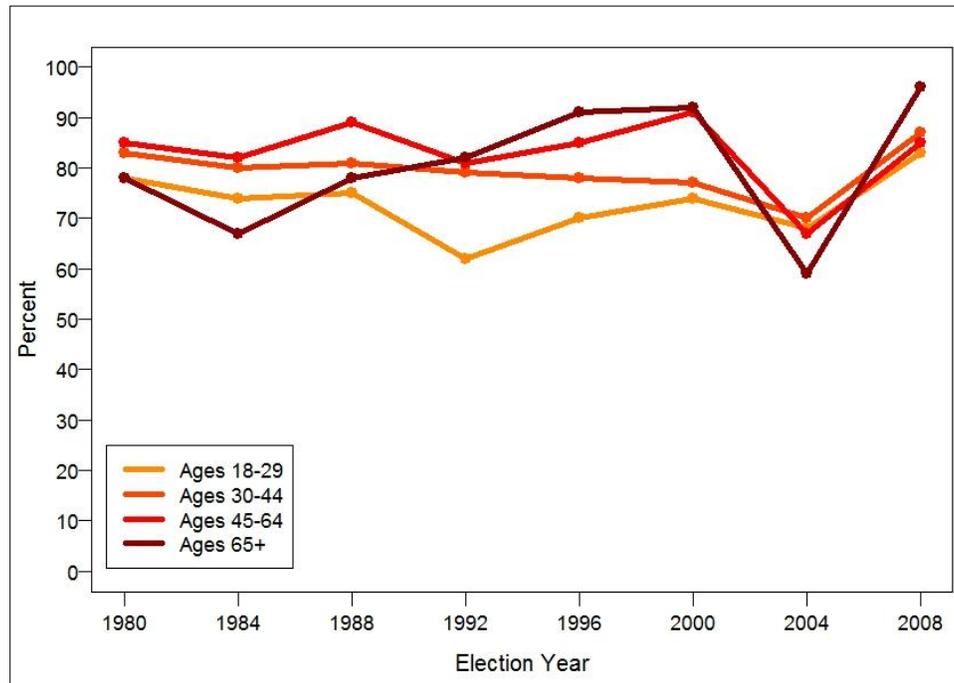


Source: American National Election Studies (available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>).

## Black Partisanship by Age

Black partisanship over the last four decades has been characterized by both change and continuity, particularly when these trends are examined by age group. Figure 4 shows Democratic identification by age group. For the most part, older blacks have identified as Democrats to greater degrees than younger blacks. At the same time, however, more than 60 percent of blacks in every age group have called themselves Democrats since 1980. During the Clinton administration, Democratic partisanship increased among both black youth and blacks in the oldest age group (65 and older), but then declined a bit during the first half of the George W. Bush administration. In the two most recent presidential elections, the differences in partisanship across age groups have narrowed substantially. Thus, among black voters, there are no major differences in partisanship across age groups.

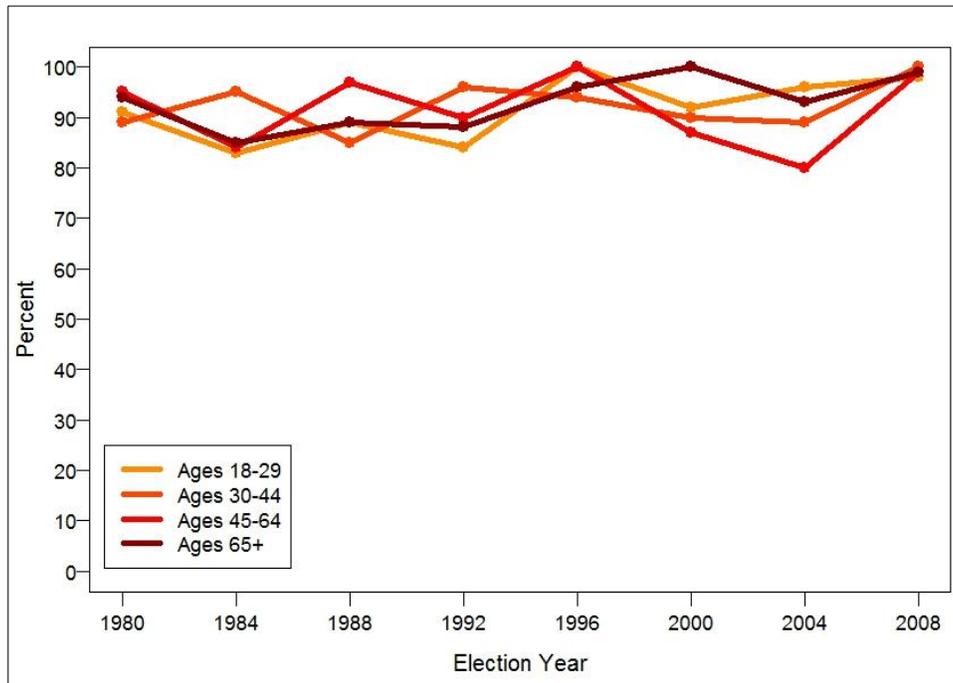
Figure 4: Black Democratic Partisanship by Age Group, 1980–2008



Source: American National Election Studies (available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>).

The consistency is even more evident when looking at rates of black support for Democratic presidential candidates (figure 5). More than 80 percent of blacks in all age groups supported the Democratic candidate for president in each of the last eight presidential elections. The differences between age groups were notable in only one election, 2004, when 80 percent of blacks between the ages of 45 and 64 voted for John Kerry, compared with 96 percent of blacks ages 18 to 29. In 2008, however, more than 95 percent of blacks in all age groups voted for Barack Obama.

Figure 5: Black Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates, 1980–2008



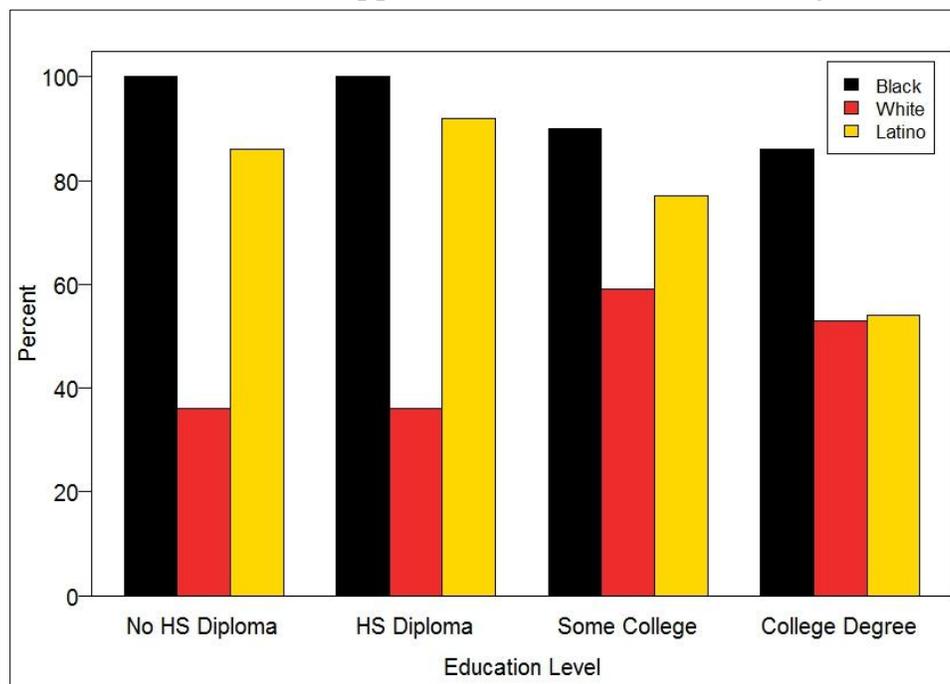
Source: American National Election Studies (available at <http://www.electionstudies.org>).

## Demographic Differences in Youth Vote Choice, 2008

### Education

Our analysis of vote choice in the 2008 presidential election shows that education, income, and gender are all important sources of variation in youth voting patterns. The relationship between education and vote choice varies by racial group. As figure 6 shows, black youth with higher levels of education voted for Barack Obama in 2008 at lower rates than black youth with lower levels of education. Similar results are found for Latino youth. However, the pattern is reversed among white youth, for whom greater education is associated with higher levels of support for Barack Obama.

Figure 6: Education and Support for Barack Obama among Youth, 2008

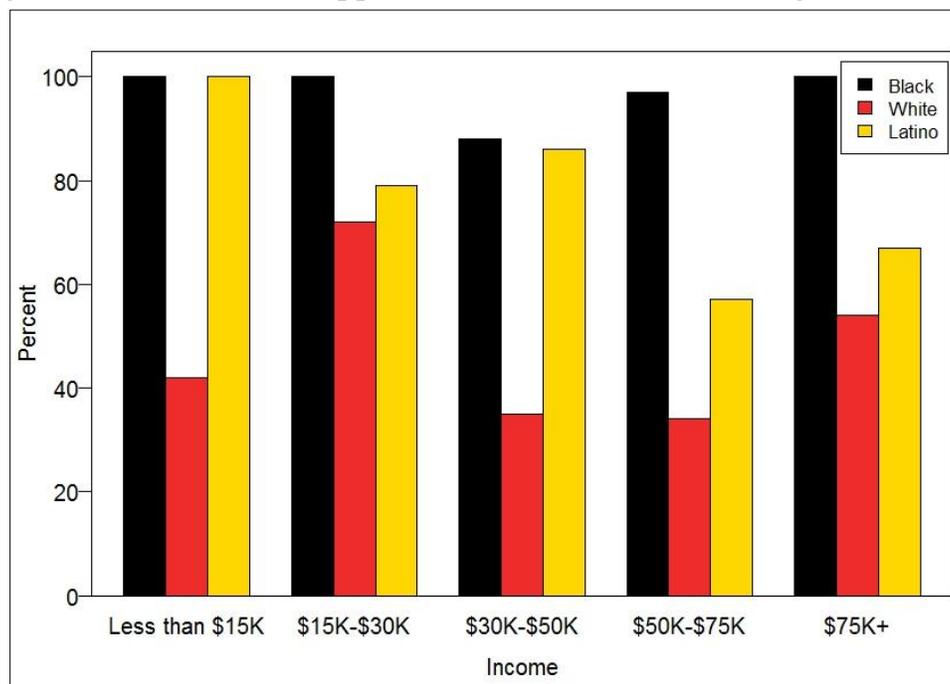


Source: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Survey (available at <http://www.2008andbeyond.com>).

## Income

Figure 7 shows that income is also associated with presidential vote choice, though the association is weaker than it is for education. This relationship is strongest among Latino youth, for whom higher income is associated with decreased support for Barack Obama. Vote choice among white youth, however, is hardly sensitive to varying levels of income, with the exception of youth in the \$15,000—\$30,000 income category, who voted for Obama at considerably higher rates than white youth in other income categories. Black youth of all income levels granted near-unanimous support for Barack Obama in 2008.

Figure 7: Income and Support for Barack Obama among Youth, 2008

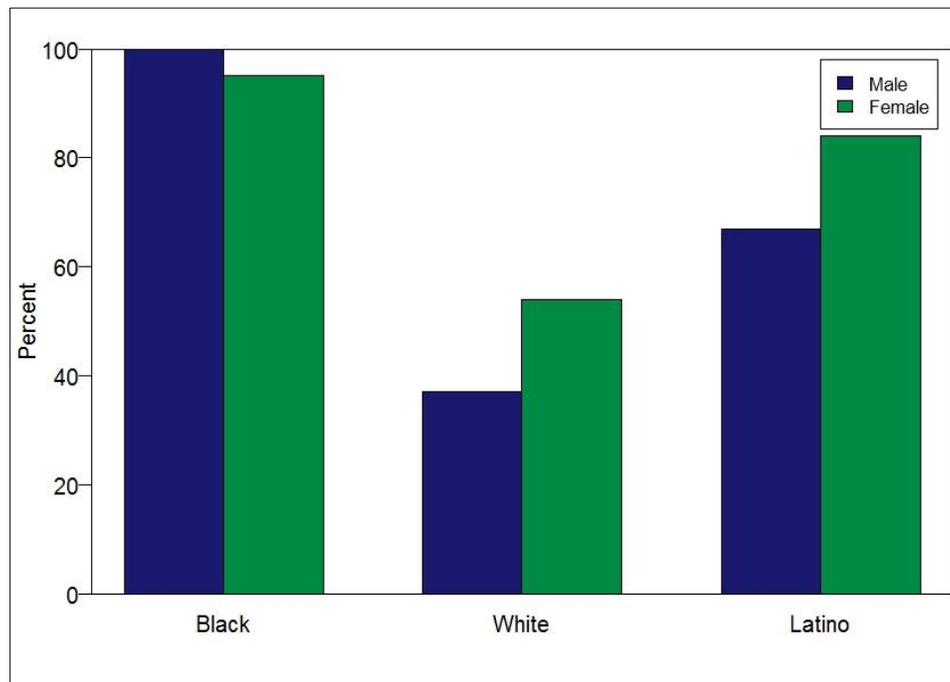


Source: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Survey (available at <http://www.2008andbeyond.com>).

## Gender

There has long been a gender gap in partisanship and vote choice in the United States, in which women vote differently than men. This is also true among young people (figure 8). However, the size of the gender gap varies considerably by race. The gender gap is smallest among blacks: virtually all young black men and women voted for Obama in 2008. However, there is a seventeen-point disparity in vote choice among men and women for Latinos and whites. Just over half (54 percent) of young white women voted for Obama in 2008, compared with 37 percent of young white men. Among Latinos, 84 percent of young women and 67 percent of young men voted for Obama.

Figure 8: The Gender Gap in Support for Barack Obama among Youth, 2008



Source: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Survey (available at <http://www.2008andbeyond.com>).

## Looking Ahead to 2012

Partisanship is one of the most stable features of American politics. Indeed, most Americans tend to stick with one party for most of their adult lives. As the analysis in this document has shown, there is considerable variation in partisanship and vote choice across racial groups. However, within each racial group, these associations remain relatively stable across time.

These findings cast doubt on the idea that youth—all youth—consistently support the Democratic Party. To be sure, large numbers of youth do identify as Democrats and go to the polls to vote for Democratic candidates. But the candidates and the party cannot take these voters for granted.

In 2008, the Obama campaign benefited from significantly increased support from Latino youth and, to a lesser degree, white youth. They also reaped benefits from mobilizing voter turnout among black youth, who overwhelmingly tend to support Democratic candidates. Thus, the key for Obama and for Democratic congressional

candidates will be to re-engage these communities and continue to mobilize black youth.