

Younger Voters

By Elizabeth Hamel, Mollyann Brodie and Richard Morin

Results from a recent survey by *The Washington Post*, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University identified important differences between the attitudes and policy preferences of younger and older individuals on key policy questions and the way in which they viewed the two major political parties.

Eighteen to 49-year-old respondents in *A Generational Look at the Public: Politics and Policy* exhibited a greater preference for private sector solutions than did those ages 50 and over (see Figure 1). The young were more likely to support school vouchers and stock market investment of Social Security contributions and to choose private insurance companies as the best way to deliver prescription drug coverage to seniors on Medicare. Younger Americans, particularly those under age 30, were also more socially tolerant than their older counterparts, showing more support for the liberal view on issues such as gay marriage, affirmative action, and women's rights.

While adults ages 50 years and over tended to trust Democrats to do a better job coping with problems facing the nation, those in the 18 to 49 age group were more likely to trust the Republican Party. Additionally, younger respondents were more likely to identify with the GOP than young people were a decade or two ago. However, as with earlier generations of young adults, members of this age group in the survey were more likely to think of themselves as political independents, suggesting that their partisan affiliations and political identities were still in the process of solidifying.

The finding that younger Americans are more socially tolerant than their elders on issues like affirmative action, gay marriage and women's rights perhaps makes sense, given that they have grown up in a world in which racial groups are better integrated, where gays and lesbians are more visible and openly accepted by many, and where many more women are in the workforce.

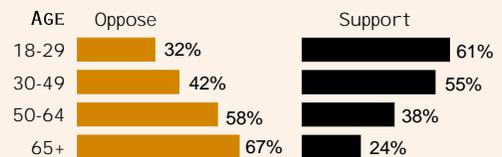
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Figure 1

Generational Gaps on the Issues

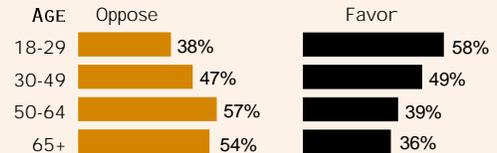
Question:

Would you support or oppose a plan in which people who chose could invest some of their Social Security contributions in the stock market?



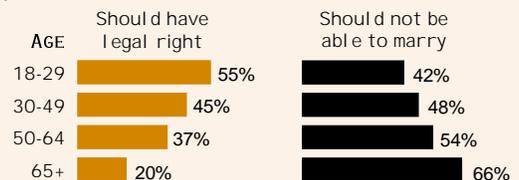
Question:

Do you favor or oppose providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools?



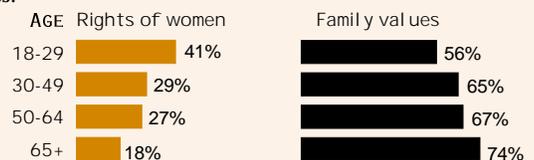
Question:

Do you think gays and lesbians should have the legal right to get married, or do you think they should not be able to get married legally?



Question:

If you absolutely had to choose between each of the following two values, which is more important to you, personally—working for the rights of women or preserving traditional family values?



Source: Survey by *Washington Post*/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University, August 2-September 1, 2002.

What is surprising is the more “conservative” attitude young people in the survey displayed when it came to private sector solutions. Some might associate this preference with a distrust in government. However, while the young were less likely to say they paid attention to politics, they scored similarly to older Americans on questions of trust in government and were more likely to prefer bigger to smaller government.

One factor driving preference for the private sector among the young might be a belief in the idea of individual choice. Just as they think that gays should have the choice to get married, they also hold that parents should have the choice to use vouchers to send their children to private schools and that individuals should have the choice to invest their Social Security contributions in the stock market.

Self-interest and self-confidence may also play in the difference between older and younger Americans, particularly in the case of private investment of Social Security funds. Young people, who have time to build their investment portfolios, may view such a scenario as an opportunity, whereas those close to or past retirement age, and those who have lived through many ups and downs of the stock market, may view it as a risk.

Evidence for this idea is found in the fact that younger respondents to the survey were much more likely than their elders to say they were confident they would make the right decisions if investing these funds in the stock market.

These generational differences have important implications for policymakers and political candidates trying to get different messages out to audiences of all ages, and especially for those attempting to appeal to a young audience. Furthermore, they suggest that policymakers might struggle in any attempt to satisfy the preferences

of various generational groups on given policy issues.

An understanding of the relationship between age and voting behavior helps put into context the ways in which these generational differences might affect the politics of the future. To address the question of shifting voter demographics, we performed a unique analysis to pre-

dict the age composition of the voting population in presidential and non-presidential election years through 2022. Two sets of data were used: the US Census Bureau’s Current Population Surveys (CPS) for election years between 1972 and 2000, which include questions on self-reported voting, and US Census projections of total resident population by age from 2002 through 2022.

By plotting self-reported voting against age for non-presidential years we were able to document the clear relationship between age and voting behavior. As other researchers have found, the likelihood of voting increases from age 18 until somewhere around age 50, then levels out, and begins to decrease again around age 65.

However, in addition to the relationship between age and voting, two important time trends emerge over these eight presidential elections. First, each

successive generation of younger individuals voted at lower and lower rates than earlier generations. For instance, in 1972, nearly half (48%) of 21-year-olds said they voted, while in 2000, just about one-third (33%) said they had. Even among those closer to mid-life, voting in presidential elections declined somewhat over this time period. In 1972, 70% of 50-year-olds voted, while in 2000, this proportion was 62%.

But perhaps most surprising is that just the opposite trend appears among the oldest age groups; for them, voting increased substantially between 1972 and 2000. While about half (49%) of 85-year-olds said they voted in the 1972 presidential election, more than six in ten people this age (62%) reported voting in 2000. At least part of this trend might be explained by the increased fitness, nutrition, and medical technology that have led to better health and greater activity among the elderly over the past thirty years.

We applied the data from 1972 and 2000—and each presidential election year in between—to a logistic regression model that predicts voter turnout by age. By entering a coefficient for time into the equation, the model not only accounts for the shape of the age-voting curve, but also for changes in the shape of the curve over time. In short,

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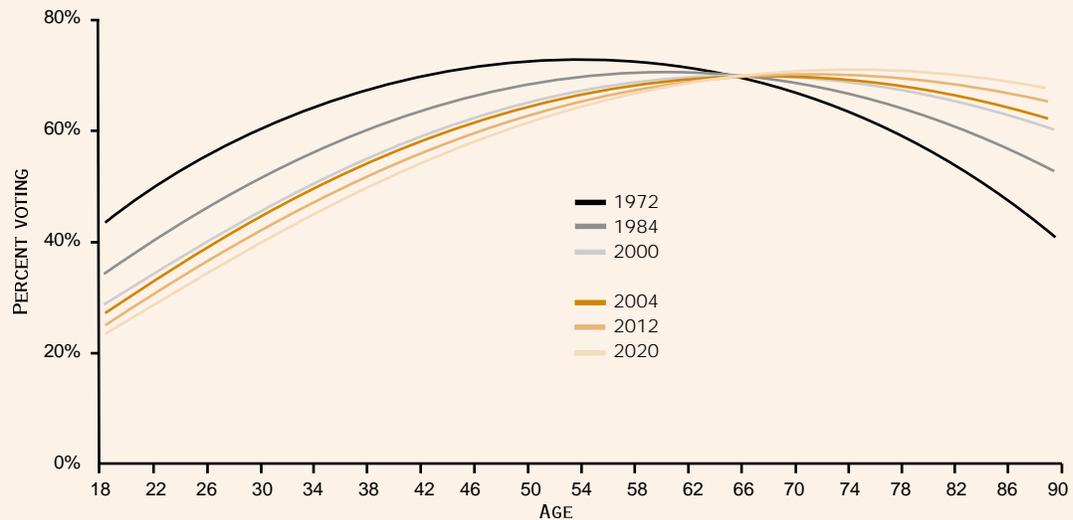
the model accurately captures not only the overall trend in voting behavior by age but also how the trend itself has changed over time.

Figure 2 shows the results of the regression model. The black and grey lines represent results for 1972, 1984, and 2000, and the orange lines represent predictions for future presidential election years.

By applying these voting probabilities to the Census population projections by age, we can predict the age composition of the voting population in these future elections.

As Figure 3 shows, more than a quarter (27%) of those voting in the presidential election in 2020 will be ages 65 years and over, and an additional three in ten (30%) will be between 50 and 64. Only 12% of those voting in 2020 are predicted to be under age 30. This is in sharp contrast to 1972, when the under-30 group made up a quarter (24%) of the voting population, and the 65 and over group accounted for 15% of voters.

Figure 2
Predicted Voting by Age in Presidential Election Years



Source: Regression model based on data from the US Census Bureau.

While some of this change is attributable to the shifting demographics of the population as the baby boom generation ages, a substantial part is a result of age-related differences in voting patterns and the changing of these patterns predicted by our model.

Even in 2020, the number of Americans ages 65 and over is expected to exceed the number of 18 to 29-year-olds only modestly, according to Census predictions; the younger group will make up 21% of the total population, while the older will make up 22%. Taken together with the voting projections, these figures suggest that older voters will outnumber the young by more than two to one on Election Day in 2020—even though both generations will be about the same size.

The results for the non-presidential election years are even more striking, since older Americans are already much more likely than their young counterparts to vote in these elections. Figure 4 shows the regression curves for off-year

elections, and Figure 5 shows the resulting age breakdown of voters. While the percentages of voters ages 18 to 29 and 65 and over were roughly equal in 1974, voters in the latter group are expected to outnumber those under age 30 by a margin of four to one in 2022. Furthermore, by 2022 Americans ages 50 and over will make up less than half (47%) of the adult population, but nearly two-thirds (65%) of voters.

One potential limitation of this analysis is the use of self-reported voting rather than actual exit poll data. We know there is over-reporting of voting in the CPS, as in all surveys. But this model is used to predict voting by age and not to estimate overall turnout. The important question is whether rates of over-reporting differ by age.

To address this, we compared exit poll data by age to CPS self-reported voting data for elections from 1990 to 2000. In several years, people over age 60 made up a slightly higher proportion of CPS voters than of exit poll voters. This may have been due to

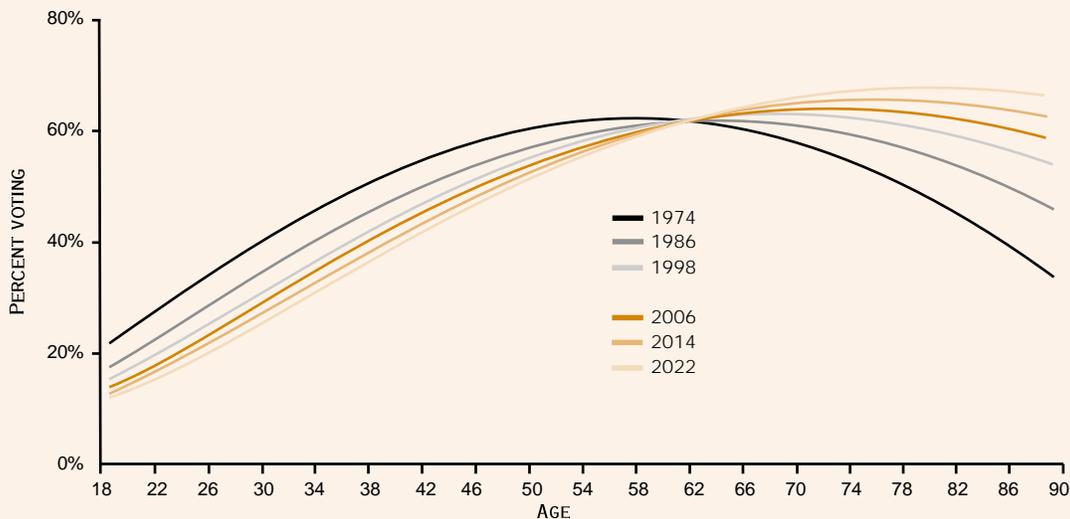
Figure 3
Age distribution of the voting population in presidential election years

AGE	1972 Actual	2020 Predicted
18-29	24%	12%
30-49	36%	31%
50-64	25%	30%
65+	15%	27%

Source: Based on data from the US Census Bureau.

Figure 4

Predicted Voting by Age in Non-Presidential Election Years



Source: Regression model based on data from the US Census Bureau.

differences in over-reporting by age (i.e., older people were perhaps more likely to say they had voted when they actually hadn't), or to the possibility that older people were under-represented in exit polls, according to Voter

There is, of course, the possibility that unanticipated events could change the shape of these curves, and hence the age composition of the voting population. For instance, if a war or other national crisis were to mobilize a large group of young people to become more engaged in the political system, the downward trend in voting among the young could be reversed or slowed considerably. Similarly, if the trend of increasing good health among older people were to stop or slow down more than our models had already taken into account, the upward trend in voting for this group could slow.

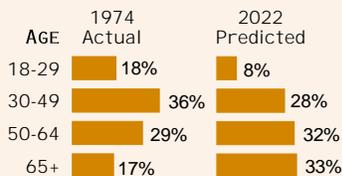
ences and win support. The distinctly pro-private sector and socially tolerant views of the younger generation suggest that candidates and policymakers might need to appeal to this audience with fundamentally different approaches than those they would use with older constituents.

On the other hand, once we consider the voting projections and recognize that younger Americans are likely to make up an increasingly smaller proportion of the electorate, candidates and policymakers might instead be able to ignore the preferences of these youngsters in favor of discussing issues of importance mainly to older Americans.

In the long run, such trends suggest that the American policy and political agendas may respond increasingly to the needs of a small segment of the population—older voters who keep going to the polls in greater and greater proportions.

Figure 5

Age distribution of the voting population in non-presidential election years



Source: Based on data from the US Census Bureau.

News Service. Overall, the differences were small, and we don't think they would have had a significant impact on our predictions.

What does all this mean? In fiercely contested battles to win elections and garner public support for various policy proposals, candidates and policymakers construct messages, public policy options and position statements to appeal to various audi-