

# THE TWENTYSOMETHING GENERATION AND THE 1992 ELECTION

*By Larry Hugick and Christine Gelhaus*

Every two decades, a new generation of voters has its first opportunity to play a significant role in electing the president. 1992 promises to be that year for today's young adults, born in the Sixties and Seventies, following the post-World War II baby boom generation. From childhood on they have had to struggle to establish their turf in a society where baby boomers set the agenda. While the baby boomers were the pampered children of the Fifties, today's young adults grew up during a period of social ferment, when self-absorbed adults often viewed kids as an inconvenience.

Sometimes ignored as children, they are misunderstood as adults. In a 1990 *Time* Magazine cover story, they are said to be "poorly understood by everyone from scholars to marketers." They are a generation without a name, at least one that many of them can feel comfortable with. Initially, demographers dubbed them the "baby bust" generation, based on the sharp decline in U.S. birth rates that began in the Sixties. But "baby busters" connotes failure and, like the alternative term "post-boom generation," defines them in relation to the baby boomers—a generation whom, according to *Time*, they see as too self-centered, fickle and impractical.

In this political year, however, it seems most appropriate to call them the "twentysomething" generation—the label used by *Time* in its 1990 cover story. This is the first presidential election in which the term "youth vote," generally regarded as those aged 18 to 29, unambiguously refers to this new generation.

Some argue that young people don't deserve much attention politically because so few of them actually turn out to vote. In the U.S. Census survey, only 36% of Americans aged 18 to 24 years claimed they voted in 1988, compared with 68%

of those aged 45 and older. But one shouldn't minimize the impact of those young people who do vote just because so many of their age mates remain on the sidelines. Exit polls suggest that as many as 20% of those who voted for president four years ago were under 30—certainly a large enough group to be pivotal in a close election.

## **Big Swing in the Youth Vote**

The popular image of today's young voter is starkly different from past perceptions of the youth vote. While young voters of the early Seventies were stereotyped as wild-eyed radicals, the twentysomething voters of 1992 are stereotyped as politically conservative, yet apathetic. This time, the youth vote is generally seen as more likely to help than hinder the incumbent Republican president's chances for re-election.

This November, if George Bush's share of twentysomething vote exceeds his share of the vote overall, it will be the third consecutive presidential election that the youth vote has not shown a Democratic slant. Prior to the 1984 election, Gallup found Democratic candidates consistently running stronger among the youngest segment of the electorate. In 1984, the year of Ronald Reagan's landslide win over Walter Mondale, the historical pattern was broken. With an economic recovery under way, soothing Reagan television ads that year told voters it was "morning in America." Support for Mondale was essentially the same among voters under 30 as among all voters (40% vs. 41%). According to Gallup, the direction of the youth vote completed its reversal in 1988. For the first time, age breakdowns of Gallup's final pre-election poll showed the Republican candidate's share of the under 30 vote (63% for George Bush) surpassing his share of the overall vote (54%).

## **Political Party Identification**

Twentysomething voters entered adulthood in a very different political climate than the baby boomers did twenty to thirty years ago. The leading edge of this new generation reached maturity around 1980, the year of the Iran hostage crisis and Ronald Reagan's election victory over Jimmy Carter. It was a time of Republican resurgence after the party's fall from grace in the Watergate era. Since the early Eighties, identification with the Democratic party has declined to near-historic lows while GOP identification has increased to a three-decade high point.

Gallup data from thousands of personal interviews collected in 1980 found the Democrats enjoying a 22-percentage point advantage over the Republicans in party identification, 46% to 24%. Similar data for the first quarter of 1992 finds that the Democratic margin has been cut in half: 39% of adults now say they are Democrats; 30% say they are Republicans. Members of the twentysomething generation are somewhat less likely to be Democratic, and more likely to be independent, than other Americans. The latest figures show roughly equal proportions of 18-to-29 year olds identifying themselves as Democrats (35%) and Independents (36%); 29% call themselves Republicans. The party identification of twentysomethings are quite different from those of the last two generations of young adults. Both the baby boomers and the more placid youth of the Fifties had a much more Democratic orientation than the young adults of the Nineties.

Gallup data suggests that young Americans' shift toward the Republican party occurred in the mid-1980s, when Ronald Reagan's popularity was at a high point. Reagan's conviction that the best way to improve the economy was to unleash U.S. business probably struck a re-

sponsive chord among the young. College students of the Eighties made business the most popular major. While many baby boom youth viewed corporations as the enemy, the new generation is distinguished by its favorable attitudes toward business.

### The Young are Bush's Best Group

Throughout most of his presidency, George Bush, like Reagan before him, has been rated higher by young adults than by older Americans. But Bush's approval ratings have declined sharply among all age groups since the Gulf War victory of last year. Only about half of twentysomethings now give him a positive rating, suggesting that their vote is up for grabs. Aggregated Gallup data for January through April 1992 shows 51% of adults under 30 approving of the job Bush is doing as president. Approval falls to 45% among the boomer age category (30 to 49 years) and to 37% among the 50 and older age category. Bush's higher ratings among young people are due primarily to his popularity among lower income, less well educated young people. The biggest falloff in Democratic party loyalty comes in their traditional, blue collar base.

### Economics and the Youth Vote

In the absence of war or an international crisis, an incumbent president's chances for re-election usually hinge on the economy. Twentysomething voters are as likely as older voters both to support the incumbent if things are going well and to look to the opposition when conditions take a turn for the worse. Young adults seem to be suffering the effects of today's stalled economy as much as any age group—bad news for Bush. Nonetheless, the young remain optimistic that things will turn around—a hopeful sign for the President.

Recent Gallup polls have consistently shown young adults giving Bush negative ratings for his handling of the economy. During 1992, disapproval has remained at or above the 70% mark. Although clearly unhappy with Bush on the economy, twentysomethings have reservations about

turning to the Democrats as an alternative. People under 30 are divided on which political party is better able to keep the country prosperous: 46% name the Republicans; 45% name the Democrats.

As long as the economy remains sluggish, Bill Clinton—and perhaps Ross Perot—will have a good opportunity to win the youth vote. But if young Americans see significant improvement in the economy, Bush becomes a heavy favorite to win their vote.

### Key Issues

Besides the economy and related economic concerns, Gallup has identified four issues of particular relevance to the young—AIDS, the environment, abortion, and race relations. Each of these four issues rates higher in importance among young voters than older voters.

Fewer than half of Americans under 30 (41%) and over 30 (36%) rate abortion as a very important presidential campaign issue. But while abortion will not have as much impact among the broader electorate as issues like the economy, a committed core of voters will base their vote on the abortion issue. And the twentysomething generation is over-represented among the group who identify abortion as *the* issue. More than one in ten (13%) registered voters under 30, compared with 9% of older voters, name abortion as one of the issues that will matter most. Among the young, George Bush's approval ratings for his handling of the abortion issue are well below his overall job approval ratings. In a recent Gallup poll, Bush's rating on abortion (35%) is 11 points lower than his overall approval rating (46%) among adults under 30.

In its recent ruling on a Pennsylvania abortion law, the Supreme Court stopped short of reversing its *Roe v. Wade* decision establishing a woman's right to an abortion. This may be good news politically for George Bush. One quarter of voters under 30 (26%) in a January 1992 Gallup poll said they would be influenced to vote against Bush if the high court were to overturn *Roe*; fewer voters over 30 said they would be so influenced (17%).

### The Youth Vote in Early Trial Heats

With about four months remaining until the elections—an eternity in presidential politics—the results of test elections provide only a rough idea of how twentysomethings are likely to vote. However, in the year of the angry voter, young people are now about as likely as older voters to be looking for an alternative presidential candidate. Until recently, the level of interest in Ross Perot's candidacy had been lowest among the young. The most recent polls, however, show Perot is running as well among young voters as among older voters. In a 3-way race, Bush and Perot each receive a little more than one-third of the youth vote (36% each) and Clinton receives 22%. Similarly, among voters 30 or older, Bush and Perot receive about one-third of the vote (32% and 33% respectively) and Clinton receives 24% of the vote.

Ross Perot has three things working in his favor among the youngest segment of the electorate: He is pro-business, like the generation in question; he is an independent, and twentysomethings are less likely than older voters to identify with either major party; and he has clearly staked out a position on abortion which is likely to play well with younger voters.

A key remaining question is whether Perot, rather than Clinton, will continue to be seen as the alternative to Bush. If Perot's campaign falters, Clinton will have a chance to challenge the incumbent President. In March, twentysomethings picked Clinton over Bush as the candidate who would do a better job of handling most of the domestic issues they, as a generation, have identified as their top concerns. However, Bush has been personally well-liked throughout most of his term by young voters. Continuing improvement in the economy between now and November would put him in a strong position to sweep the twentysomething vote.

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