

## The Politics of Age—The Youth Vote in American Elections

*“Voting is for old people”—Urban Outfitters tee shirt, circa 2004*



*The above picture is the controversial “Voting is for Old People” tee shirt sold at Urban Outfitters during 2004. It struck a chord with members of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and was eventually discontinued. However, it clearly illustrates the issues of apathy among young voters.*

### Turnout by Age in Presidential Elections: 1964 to 2004

Year	Race	18-20	21-24	25-30	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
1964	Johnson (D) vs. Goldwater	-	51	65	73	76	76	66
1968	Nixon (R) vs. Humphry(D)	-	50	63	71	75	75	66
1972	Nixon (R) vs. McGovern(D)	48	51	60	66	71	71	64
1976	Carter (D) vs. Ford (R)	38	46	55	63	68	70	62
1980	Carter (D) vs. Reagan (R)	36	43	55	64	68	71	65
1984	Reagan vs. Mondale(D)	37	44	55	64	68	72	68
1988	Bush (R) vs. Dukakis (D)	33	38	48	61	67	69	69
1992	Clinton (D) vs. Bush (R)	39	46	53	64	69	72	70
1996	Clinton (D) vs. Dole (R)	31	33	43	55	62	68	67
2000	Bush (R) vs. Gore (D)	28	35	44	55	62	67	68
2004	Bush (R) vs. Kerry (D)	41	42	47	57	64	70	69

Look at the increase in voter turnout from 2000 to 2004! Looks like *Vote or Die* and *Rock the Vote* really worked.....

<b>Turnout by Age in Presidential Elections: 1964 to 2004</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>65+/21-24 ratio</b>
1964	Johnson (D) vs. Goldwater	1.3:1
1968	Nixon (R)vs. Humphry(D)	1.3:1
1972	Nixon (R) vs. McGovern(D)	1.3:2
1976	Carter (D) vs. Ford (R)	1.3:3
1980	Carter (D)vs. Reagan (R)	1.5:1
1984	Reagan vs. Mondale(D)	1.5:2
1988	Bush (R)vs. Dukakis (D)	1.8:1
1992	Clinton (D) vs. Bush (R)	1.5:1
1996	Clinton (D)vs. Dole (R)	2.0:1
2000	Bush (R) vs. Gore (D)	1.9:1
2004	Bush (R) vs. Kerry (D)	1.7:1

Unfortunately, the increase in turnout was across the board. Although the youth vote did increase, other cohorts increased as well.

**In 2004 for every 1 vote cast in the 21-24 age group, 1.7 votes were cast in the 65+ age group.**

*Why is the youth demographic unique? Why does it differ from other voting cohorts?*

**Erikson and Tedin (2000) offer 3 reasons:**

- (1) Composition effects: younger cohorts are better educated than others who came before; this increase in education could make for a better informed, more sophisticated electorate
- (2) Life cycle effects: the process of maturation results in greater responsibilities and consequently greater conservatism

*“If you're not a liberal when you're 25, you have no heart. If you're not a conservative by the time you're 35, you have no brain.”*

- (3) Generational effects: unique events and experiences encountered during the impressionable years lead to differing political outlooks.
  - The 9/11 Generation vs. the Vietnam Generation
  - The Great Depression vs. the Decadent 80s
  - Generation X vs. Generation Y

Today's lecture will focus primarily on composition effects; specifically the role of political knowledge and voting.

*Is this the least politically knowledgeable political generation, like, ever?*



NOTE: Despite her tee shirt, Paris Hilton didn't vote in the 2004 presidential election; unfortunately she did not die.

Education levels have steadily increased over time; this rise has been driven by the replacement of cohorts that averaged 10 years of education with by new generations who have averaged over 13 years of schooling.

**What is the expected relationship between education levels and political knowledge?**

- (1) One would expect that political knowledge would increase with the rise in education levels.
- (2) However, this isn't the case; the general decline in political engagement has offset the positive impact of rising education levels.

**With the rise in education why hasn't the new generation of voters ushered in a new age of a more politically informed public?**

Just because the potential is there doesn't mean that someone will use it.

A lack of basic educational skills may make it difficult for someone to absorb political information, but even the most advanced educational skills will not help if one is not exposed to current affairs through the news.

By making it easier, you don't improve political knowledge....you may be improving other things (Facebook expertise, video games?)

## Political vs. Pop Culture Knowledge Test

### **Political Knowledge Test**

1. Who is the current Secretary of State?
2. Name three members of the current US Supreme court.
3. Who is the current Speaker of the House?
4. Who is your member in the House of Representatives?
5. Who is Dana Perino?

### **Pop Culture Knowledge Test**

1. What celebrity recently lost custody of her children?
2. Name 3 cast members from the TV show Friends.
3. Who/what is Brangelina?
4. What is the name of Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes's baby?
5. McDreamy is a nickname for a character on what TV show?

### **Changing Political Knowledge/Age Relationship (entries = average % correct on factual questions)**

	<30	30-44	45-64	65+
1948	44	48	6	33
1960	55	63	61	53
1964	66	72	68	61
1966	49	48	49	40
1968	61	60	61	52
1972	51	54	52	47
1976	53	64	64	57
1980	38	46	45	42
1984	38	45	50	43
1986	28	39	40	35
1988	32	48	51	48
1990	26	35	37	36
1992	28	36	40	38
1994	39	55	57	57
1996	57	65	67	65
1998	47	52	60	58
2000	34	44	52	50
2004	36	47	52	55

## The Decline of the Newspaper and the Increase of Infotainment

*How many of you read the newspaper?*

% Reading Newspaper Daily	
1957	76
1958	75
1967	73
1972	69
1975	67
1977	63
1978	58
1982	53
1983	56
1985	53
1986	54
1987	56
1988	51
1989	50
1990	53
1991	52
1993	47
1994	50
1996	42
1998	43
2000	37
2002	42
2004	41

SOURCE: General Social Survey

## Network vs. Cable TV News

(1) Network news viewership has sunk to an all-time low.

- In 1974, all but 7% of the people were able to rate Walter Cronkite....by comparison 52% of people could not rank Senator Walter Mondale and 65% could not rate Senator Bentsen (keep in mind both of these men were gearing up for presidential campaigns).
- Can anyone name the anchors of the major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) nightly news shows?
- The only thing keeping the network news alive is the viewership of older Americans.

The proof lies in the advertising! On a randomly chosen night (Jan. 13, 2004), the CBS nightly news was interspersed with commercials for the following products: *Pepto Bismol, Ambien, Ex-Lax, Pepcid Complete, Imitrex, Ester-C, Dulcolax, Maalox, Wellbutrin XL, Detrol LA, and Benefiber.*



## **(2) Is cable TV news a suitable alternative for network news programs?**

The 24 hour news format is especially well formatted for the youth demographic.

When asked “Are you more the kind of person who watches or listens to the news at regular times, or are you more the kind of person who checks in on the news from time to time?”

- 65% of respondents under 30 indicated they check news from time to time
- 45% of respondents from 30-64 indicated they check news from time to time
- ONLY 33% of senior citizens indicated they check news from time to time

**The good news:** Again, the 24 hour news networks have the *potential* to increase political knowledge and political viewership...in fact, 7% of respondents who scored highest on political engagement measures (for example, indicating that they enjoyed following political campaigns) indicated that cable news was their preferred media outlet.

**The bad news:** The potential of cable news is often not realized in practice.

**Even worse news:** A content analysis of CNN, FOX, and MSNBC revealed the following;

1. Only 11% of the time was taken up with written and edited stories
2. The role of the reporter was primarily to talk extemporaneously
3. Stories were repeated frequently, usually without any important new information
4. Coverage of the news as spotty, ignoring many important topics

## **Extent to Which Adults Under 30 Followed 2004 News Stories Compared to Senior Citizens**

### **Stories Young Adults Paid More Attention to than Seniors**

Summer Olympics in Athens—Aug. and Sept.  
Release of movie Fahrenheit 9/11—July  
Release of movie The Passion of the Christ—March

### **Stories Young Adults Paid Slightly Less Attention to than Seniors**

9/11 Commission Hearings—April  
Janet Jackson Super Bowl show—Feb.  
High price of gas—asked in five monthly surveys  
Abuse of Iraqi prisoners—June  
NASA landing spacecraft on Mars—Jan.

### **Stories Young Adults Paid Substantially Less Attention to than Seniors**

Bill Clinton's book—July  
Democratic Convention—Aug.  
Republican Convention—Sept.  
Current situation in Iraq—asked in seven monthly surveys  
Gay marriage debate—Feb. and March  
Terrorist bombings in Spain—March  
Ethnic violence in Sudan—July  
2004 presidential election—asked in seven monthly surveys  
Unrest in Haiti—March  
Death of Ronald Reagan—June  
Reports of Mad Cow disease—Jan.  
Saddam Hussein's court appearance—July  
Code Orange alert—Jan. and August  
Hurricanes in the southeast—Sept.  
Transfer of power in Iraq—July

### **Stories Young Adults Paid Far Less Attention to than Seniors**

Ads by the Swift Boat Vets—Sept.  
Reports that Libya will end its weapons program—Jan.  
No WMD found in Iraq—Feb.  
Conviction of Martha Stewart—March  
Democratic vice presidential nomination—July  
Bill Clinton's heart surgery—Sept.  
Killing of Russian school children—Sept.  
Pres. Bush's National Guard service—Feb. and Sept.  
Richard Clarke's criticism of Bush administration—April  
Recent attacks on civilians and troops in Iraq—Jan and Sept.  
Earthquake in Iran—Jan.

*SOURCE: 2004 Pew Research Center surveys*

## Take home message

**If one is truly motivated to follow all the ins and outs of political life, then around the clock cable news channels provide far more opportunities than ever before in the history of TV!!**

**However, the fact that young people rely so heavily on cable news means that they are fed a diet of quick snippets as opposed to full stories that could allow them to grasp details.**



Walter Cronkite, CBS News



Martha MacCallum, FOX News Anchor

**Who/what is to blame for the decreasing political knowledge among American youth?**

**A lot of blame has been placed with the rise of modern news sources.**

- (1) Studies have shown that increased time on the internet does not necessarily translate into time spent reading online news.
- (2) As mentioned above, many blame the 24 hour news networks for poor and diluted news coverage.

***Maybe shows like Nancy Grace actually politically inform people b/c they are people that otherwise wouldn't be paying attention (i.e. it creates a net gain)?***

- (3) Infotainment and sensationalism is rampant across news stories, often times in place of hard facts.

***Although infotainment news drives down quality, what if it increases quantity?***

**Further, some even blame individual level factors:**

- (1) Younger people are “on the go” and don't have time to sit and watch the evening news
- (2) Younger people choose online sources of news (Google news, for example) instead of reading the newspaper

***Is it better to have 50% of people read the news papers, or 75% tune into various news programs?***

- (3) Younger people are becoming increasingly cynical about their role in the electoral process.

All of these topic (and more) can be studied and analyzed at great length.

## The Daily Show and the Rise of Cynicism

Baumgartner and Morris (2006) “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth”

*Who here watches The Daily Show?*

### Quick Facts

- Viewership is young (18 to 24 age group)
- *Remember: these same youth are relying less on mainstream political news sources such as network news, newspapers, and newsmagazines*
- Only 23% of regular Daily Show viewers report that they followed “hard news” closely.
- Over half (54%) of young adults in this age group reported that they got at least some news about the 2004 presidential campaign from comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*.
- Because young people are more impressionable (Sears, 1983) and thus more prone to any adverse effects *The Daily Show* might have, the political effects of *The Daily Show* are important to understand.

Finding/Conclusions of Baumgartner and Morris's study:

- (1) Young adults' perceptions of presidential candidates, especially those of lesser known candidates, are diminished as a result of exposure to The Daily Show .i.e. exposure to the Daily Show increases cynicism towards candidates.
- (2) Ultimately, negative perceptions of candidates could have participation implications by keeping more youth from the polls.
- (3) The evidence presented in this study qualifies previous arguments that soft news adds to democratic discourse i.e. watching the Daily Show increases the net gain of political knowledge (much like watching Oprah).
- (4) Exposure to the show lowered trust in the media and the electoral process.
- (5) Stewart's coverage leads viewers to blame any lack of understanding not on themselves but on those who run the system.
- (6) However, viewers of the Daily Show tend to have increased internal efficacy and, all other things being equal, this could contribute to greater participation.
- (7) Viewers of the Daily Show demonstrate higher knowledge of political knowledge than non-viewers.

**So...is the Daily Show (and shows like it) good or bad for increasing turnout and political knowledge among young voters?**

**Is there still hope? Or, does the youth vote even matter?**



**Should we even bother to ask anyone under 30?**

**Given the turnout rates, low political knowledge, and general cynicism/apathy would it be advantageous for politicians to turn a blind eye to the youth vote?**

**Better yet, have they already?**