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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

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The 2008 Early Vote

Obama dominates among new electorate

Thanks to recent reforms to state voting laws, a high level of voter interest in the presidential election, and concerted campaign efforts, early voting¹ took on new and greater prominence in 2008. Current estimates suggest that nearly one third of ballots were cast early in 2008, up from approximately 23 percent in 2004. The early vote had a distinct impact on the race. It shaped campaign strategy and tactics, allowed the candidates (especially Barack Obama) to lock in a sizable portion of their strong support, and left John McCain facing a significant deficit to make up on Election Day.

There is not a single explanation for who votes early and why. The most important factor is state law, which can essentially mandate early voting or reduce it to a tiny proportion of the overall vote through strict limitations. Age plays an important role, as older voters are more likely to cast early ballots. However, with more states moving to no excuse early voting, a number of other dynamics come into play. Primary among these are voter engagement and enthusiasm, which generally produce higher levels of early voting. Campaigns, as well, are focusing more resources on targeting supporters to vote early. Finally, the benefits of early voting also likely play a role, as some people find early voting more convenient (or Election Day voting less convenient) than others.

Early voting is somewhat fluid from one election cycle to the next. While majorities of those who voted early in 2004 and 2006 also voted early in 2008, a significant percentage of previous early voters either voted on Election Day or did not vote in this election. Nearly half of 2008 early voters did not vote early in any of the previous four federal elections. However, nearly 80 percent of these “first time” early voters previously voted on Election Day.

¹ As used in this document, early voting means any ballot that is cast by mail or any ballot that is cast in person before Election Day.



The early vote overall was very beneficial to Obama and Democrats. Self-identified Democrats made up a disproportionate share of the early vote, and many of them considered themselves strong Democrats. Obama built up a sizable margin in the early vote, taking what proved to be an insurmountable lead over McCain into Election Day. Similarly, Democratic congressional candidates ran nearly as well among early voters.

The following analysis is based on Democracy Corps national and presidential battleground surveys conducted from June through November, 2008.² It is important to note that some of the data we reference was collected several months before the election, and that some voters' opinions may have changed in the interim. The survey response data has been matched to the Catalyst voter file, which includes a flag for actual early voters in the 2008 general election, aggregated from state data. Data that could not be matched to the voter file is excluded from this analysis because we could not determine whether such respondents voted early.

Because of the time lag between data collection and actual voting, potential bias introduced in the matching process, as well as the sampling and non-sampling error inherent to all surveys, these data should not be interpreted as precisely representative. For example, the age distribution in this data is slightly older than the actual age distribution of the electorate, and Obama's lead in the data is smaller than his actual margin of victory. However, we believe that these limitations do not significantly detract from the usefulness of the data, particularly when drawing relative conclusions about those who voted early.

Composition of the 2008 Early Vote

While the precise number of early votes is difficult to ascertain due to differences in state categorization and reporting practices, approximately 30 to 33 percent of ballots in the 2008 general election were cast early, according to Professor Paul Gronke of the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College.³ This represents a significant increase from 2004, when approximately 22 percent of votes were cast prior to Election Day. Early voting has increased rapidly since the 1990s as more states have moved away from requiring an excuse to vote early.⁴

The 34 states with some form of no excuse early voting account for the 94 percent of the early votes in the Democracy Corps dataset. These states are mainly concentrated in the southern and western parts of the country, although several states in the upper Midwest have also liberalized their early voting laws in recent years. In Oregon and in all but two counties in Washington, all voting is conducted early by mail. Nearly all northeastern states require an

² Unweighted n=15,127. National and battleground survey data were weighted to be representative of the national electorate, and older data were weighted down relative to more recent data to reduce the impact of changes between the survey date and the election. Weighted n=11,518 including 1,989 early voters. Margin of sampling error is +/- 0.9 percent for the total sample and +/- 2.2 percent among early voters.

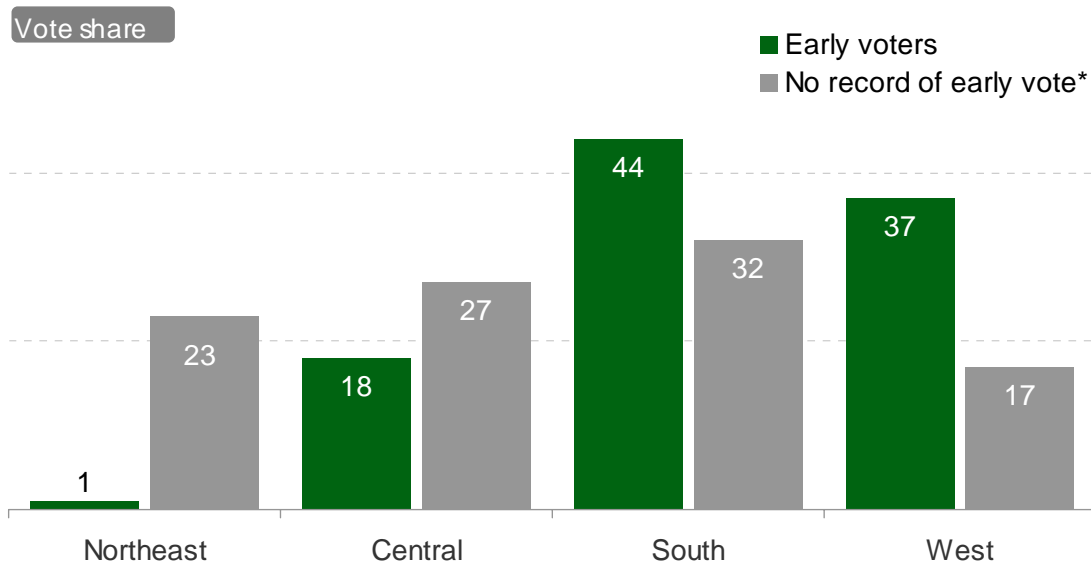
³ ["Early voting grows in popularity."](#) *All Things Considered*, 11/7/2008. NPR.

⁴ ["A third of electorate could vote before Nov. 4"](#). By Stephen Ohlemacher and Julie Pace. Sep 21, 2008. Associated Press.



excuse to vote absentee, so very few early votes come from that area. The chart below outlines the distribution of the early vote by region in the dataset.

Early vote heavily concentrated in South, West



**Because Election Day vote history is not yet available, no record of early vote may mean that the respondent voted on Election Day or that the respondent did not vote at all. It is also possible that the respondent voted early but the state did not yet post a record of that early vote.*

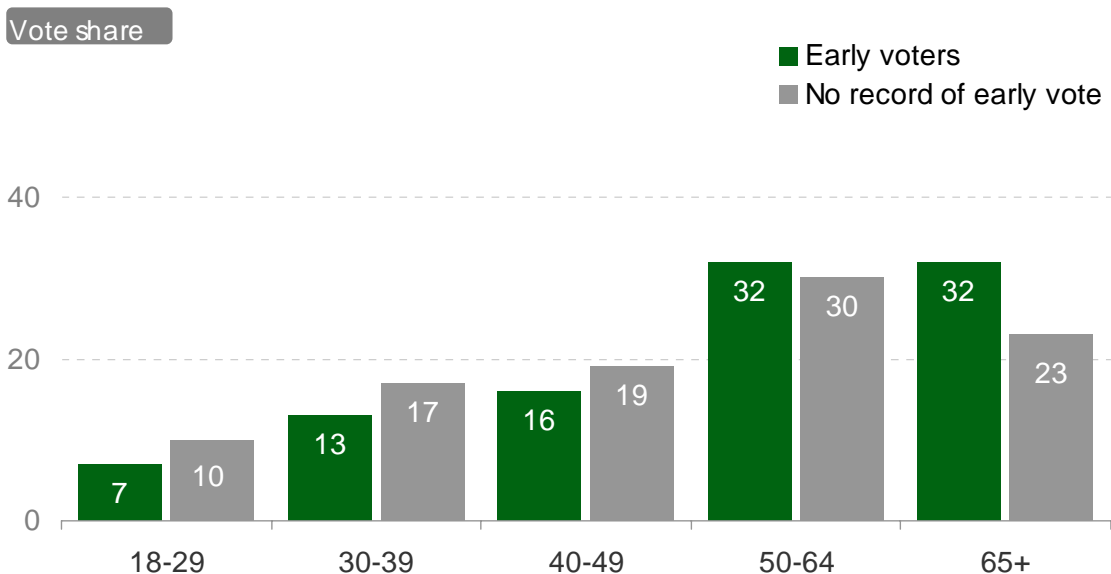
Traditionally, age has been strongly correlated with absentee voting, as older voters were more likely to qualify for one of the excuses required to vote early. Within the states that still require an excuse, older voters continue to make up a very large share of the early vote: in the Democracy Corps data, 79 percent of early voters in these states were age 50 or older and 46 percent were seniors (age 65 and over).

But as we noted earlier, the overwhelming majority of the early vote now comes from no-excuse states. The early vote in those states still skews older than the overall electorate, but much less dramatically than in the excuse-required states: 64 percent in this dataset were over 50 and 32 percent were seniors. Because so much of the early vote comes from no excuse states, the age distribution for the early vote overall tracks these numbers closely. The following chart compares the age breakdowns of early and non-early voters.⁵

⁵ “Non-early voters” is defined as any respondent for whom we do not have a 2008 early vote match. Like all Democracy Corps respondents, they qualified as “likely” voters through a series of screening questions, but because comprehensive Election Day vote history is not yet available, we do not know whether they voted on Election Day or did not vote at all. It is also possible that a small portion of them were early voters but were not yet reported as such by the states.



Age distribution of early, non-early voters



Other demographic distinctions were less pronounced but still played important roles in early voting. Women made up 58 percent of early voters in the Democracy Corps data, compared to 53 percent of the non-early group. In a regression analysis, the tendency of women to vote early more than men holds true when controlling for age and partisanship (that is, it is not simply an effect of women living longer and identifying more as Democrats). African-American voters also made up a larger share of the early vote than of the non-early vote, likely reflecting voter enthusiasm and successful efforts on the part of the Obama campaign and allied groups to bank the votes of this highly supportive segment of the electorate before Election Day.

Finally, urbanized areas exhibited noticeably higher levels of early voting than less densely populated areas. Fifty-eight percent of the early vote in the dataset came from a central county of a metropolitan statistical area,⁶ compared to 48 percent of the non-early vote. Voters in these counties may find more of a convenience benefit to early voting than voters in less urbanized areas. Many stories of long lines at the polls originate in urban areas, and their residents are more likely to encounter traffic and other hassles that discourage in-person voting.

⁶ A metropolitan statistical area is a geographic entity defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. A metro area contains a core urban area of 50,000 or more population. Each metro area consists of the counties containing the core urban area, as well as any adjacent counties that have a high degree of social and economic integration (as measured by commuting to work) with the urban core.



Early Voters are a Fluid Group

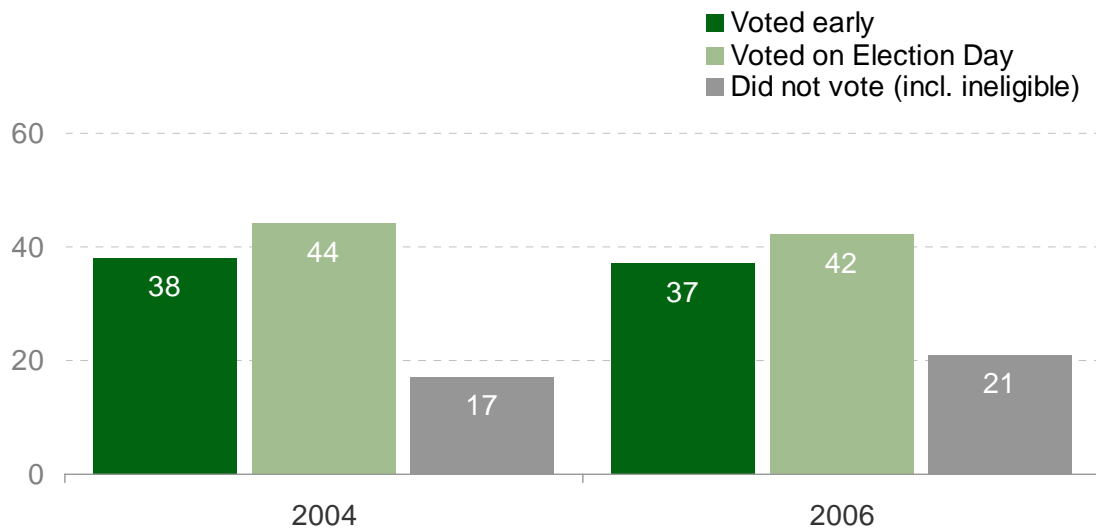
The 2008 early electorate was comprised of a blend of habitual early voters, who vote early in each election, and irregular early voters who vote early in some elections but not others. Additionally, as the overall use of early voting has expanded, each successive election brings in a new wave of first-time early voters.

Based on actual vote history from the voter file, 55 percent of 2004 general election early voters and 55 percent of 2006 early voters voted early in the 2008 general election. While this figure likely understates repeated early voting slightly, as 2008 reporting is not entirely complete, it is clear that a significant share of previous early voters either voted on Election Day or did not vote at all in 2008.

While previous early voting is a good indicator of future early voting, it is far from being an all-inclusive predictor, especially as early voting continues to increase. Thirty-eight percent of 2008 early voters in the dataset also voted early in 2004 and 37 percent voted early in 2006. However, as the chart below indicates, majorities of 2008 early voters either voted on Election Day or did not vote at all in the preceding two federal elections.

Many 2008 early voters did not vote early in previous years

2008 early voters by 2004, 2006 vote type



Just under half (48 percent) of the 2008 early voters in the dataset were “first-time” early voters who did not vote early in any of the preceding four federal general elections, dating back to 2000. Of these, about one in five was a first-time voter altogether, while the rest had previously voted but had not voted early.



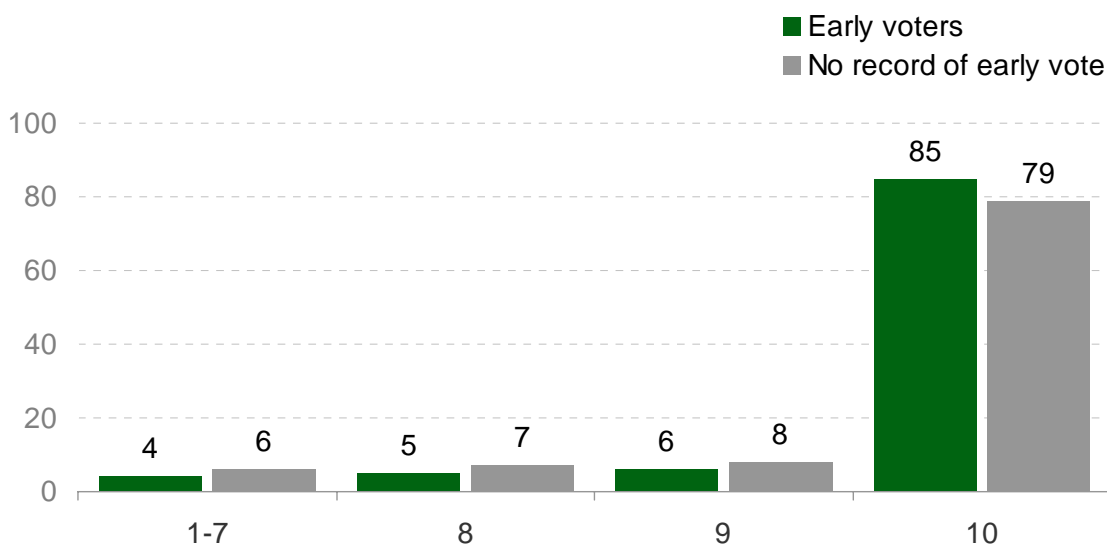
Engagement and Early Voting

By nearly every available measure, 2008 early voters exhibited higher levels of political engagement and enthusiasm than those who did not vote early. Early voters reported higher levels of interest and stronger views about the candidates and the issues. The campaigns were more likely to contact early voters and early voters were more likely to get involved with the campaigns.

When asked to rate their level of attention to the November election on a 1-10 scale, nearly all of the likely voters who qualified for the surveys responded 8 or higher, including 96 percent of early voters and 94 percent of non-early voters. However, when looking specifically at those who rated their interest a ten, a noticeable difference emerges, as 85 percent of early voters gave the highest possible rating compared to 79 percent of non-early voters.

Early voters more interested in election

Self-reported level of attention to the election, 1-10 scale

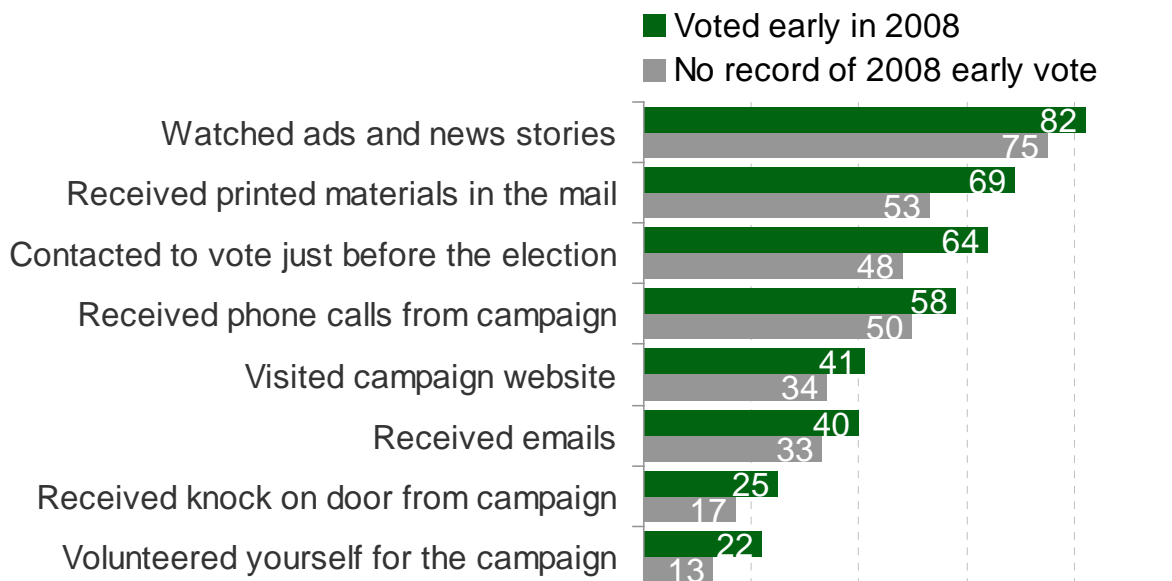


A series of voter contact and interaction questions from the Democracy Corps post-election survey provide further illustration of the relationship between political engagement and early voting. As the following table indicates, early voters were more likely than others to report receiving campaign contacts, watching campaign ads and receiving print materials, and active involvement with the campaigns. In particular, early voters were far more likely to receive targeted contacts, such as mail and door knocks, and they were nearly twice as likely as non-early voters to have volunteered with a campaign.



Early voters more likely to report contacts and engagement

Percent of voters reporting specified contact



In other measures of engagement and enthusiasm, early voters were more likely than non-early voters to consider themselves strong partisans and strong supporters of candidates. They were also more likely than non-early voters to express strong views (i.e. “very well” or “much better”) on nearly every candidate attribute and issue question asked in the surveys.

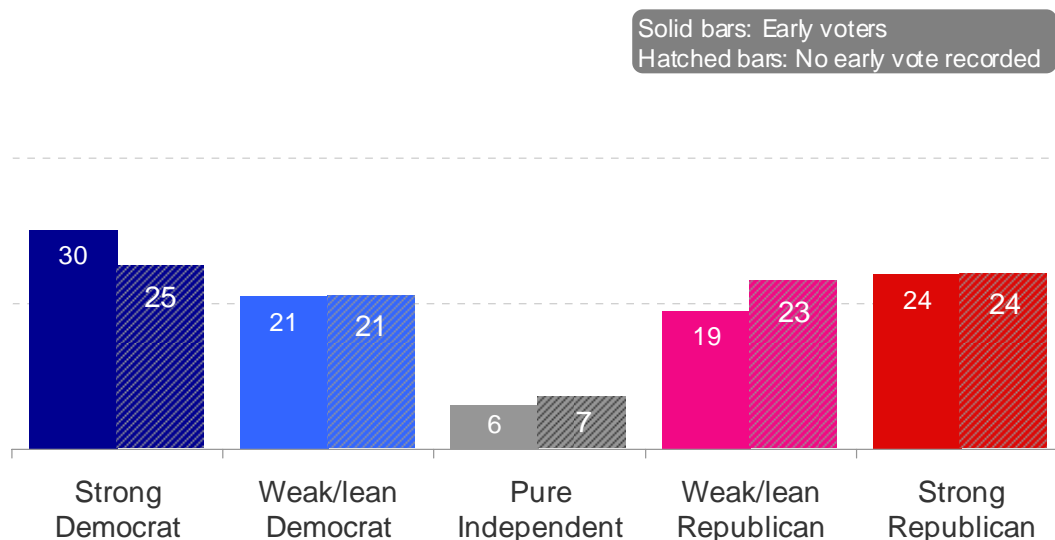
2008 Early Vote Favored Obama, Democrats

Self-identified Democrats outnumbered Republicans throughout the election cycle and the Democratic advantage in partisanship was particularly pronounced among early voters. In fact, 41 percent of early voters in the Democracy Corps surveys identified as Democrats, while 34 percent considered themselves Republicans. Among non-early voters, the partisanship gap was much smaller, with 37 percent identifying as Democrats and 36 percent as Republicans.

In particular, the early electorate included a disproportionate number of voters who identified as strong Democrats, and a low percentage who identified as weak Republicans or lean Republican. This pattern, illustrated in the chart that follows, suggests an “enthusiasm gap”—high motivation levels on the Democratic side combined with low motivation levels among non-base Republicans—that is particularly acute among early voters.



Early voters: more strong Democrats, fewer weak Republicans



Early voters were also more likely than non-early voters to express disapproval of President Bush’s job in office, and most of them were strongly critical of his performance. Fifty-six percent of early voters strongly disapproved of the president’s job, compared to 48 percent of non-early voters.

Barack Obama ran very strongly among early voters, winning 52 percent of the vote among the Democracy Corps early voters compared to 42 percent for McCain. Obama and McCain ran even at 47 percent among non-early voters in the dataset. Note that these figures likely understate Obama’s margins among both early and non-early voters because the overall Obama margin in the matched Democracy Corps data is smaller than his real-world margin of victory.

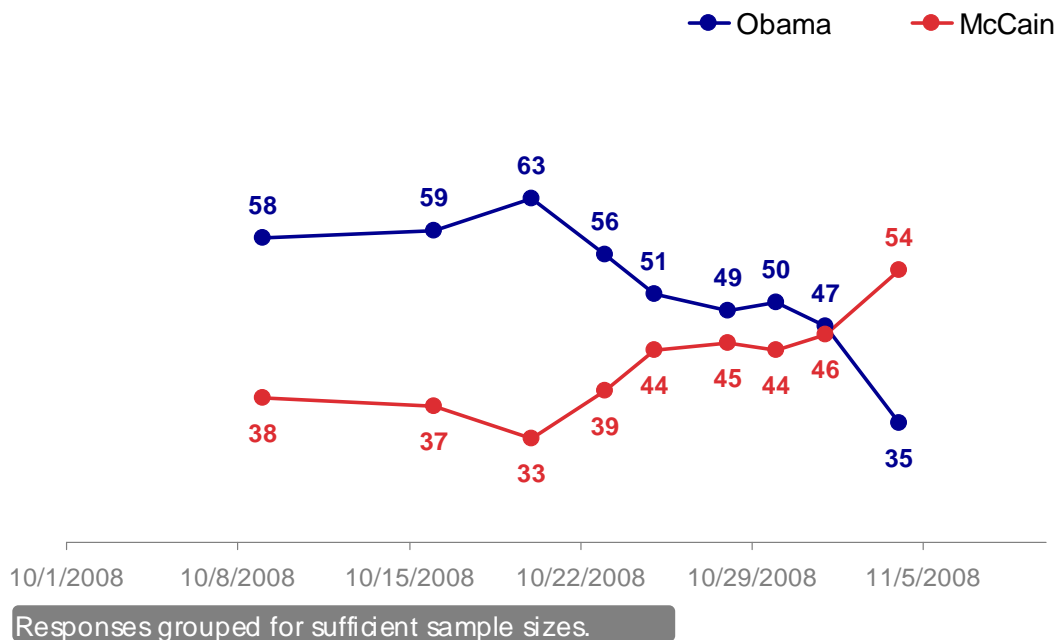
Obama performed especially well among “first-time” early voters who did not vote early in any of the previous four federal general elections, leading McCain by 17 points, 56 – 39 percent, among them in the dataset. Among early voters who had also voted early in a previous election, Obama led McCain by a more modest 5 points, 50 to 45 percent.

Obama also ran very strongly among those who were first to cast their early ballots in 2008. As Election Day approached, Obama’s margin among early voters narrowed, and McCain actually led Obama among the very last early voters to cast their ballots.



Obama margin was very large among first early votes cast

Early vote shifted toward McCain as Election Day approached



The large Obama lead among the first early voters may reflect greater enthusiasm and eagerness to vote on the part of Obama supporters. By voting in large numbers as early as possible, Obama supporters left a remaining early vote pool that tilted less toward their candidate. It is also possible that the last early votes consisted of more McCain supporters for a structural reason, such as overseas military ballots that arrived after Election Day.

Democratic congressional candidates also performed better among early voters, leading their Republican counterparts by 9 points, 51 – 42 percent. Among non-early voters, Democratic congressional candidates led by 3 points, 48 – 45 percent. The smaller early/non-early gap here suggests that enthusiasm towards Obama specifically, not just Democratic partisanship, was driving some of the early vote.

Early Voting: a Complex Interaction

The decision to vote early and the behavior of early voters are based on the interaction of a number of different factors, including state laws, demographics, engagement and enthusiasm, campaign contact, and convenience. Some of these factors, such as early voting laws and age, affect early voting in ways that are predictable and repeated. Others though, such as enthusiasm and convenience, could vary in their effects from one election to the next and depending on an individual voter's changing situation. There is some continuity to voting early from one election



to the next, but there is also substantial fluidity in who votes early from one election to the next, determined in part by the continuing expansion of early voting.

Democrats made the most of early voting in 2008. A significant enthusiasm gap in the electorate was amplified in the early vote. This enthusiasm benefitted all Democrats but was particularly driven by the presidential race. Democrats seized the opportunity to bank much of their strong support in advance which allowed them to focus their resources as Election Day approached and placed them well on their way to a historic victory.