



Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Democracy Corps

Youth for the Win!

Audacity of Hope

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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

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Youth for the Win!

At a time when most national surveys show the presidential race tightening, Barack Obama's support among America's youth remains robust and stable. Young people's enthusiasm for turning out and their engagement in this election are undiminished in this time period, despite the new, largely negative tone of the campaign. Young people stand by this candidate in large measure because they have so much invested in his candidacy.

Their agenda is broad and bold. They want our troops out of Iraq, they want a real energy plan that is kind to both the environment and to consumers, they want more affordable health care and lower taxes for middle income families. As this project has consistently chronicled, their agenda is largely dominated by the economy and rising cost of living. In one of the most striking findings from this survey, young people identify paying off their debts as the most important personal goal, ahead of marriage, children and even finding a good job.

While young people believe their generation will not be better off than their parents' generation, young people believe they personally will enjoy a better life than their parents. This ambition and confidence emerges acutely in focus groups and is a distinguishing generational trait. Most important, young people dare to hope.

Critics of this generation often describe it as apathetic and cynical. This research does nothing to support that stereotype. Young people believe change is possible. They believe that by 2012, college will be more accessible, the economy improved, the country using more renewable energy and health care will be more affordable. The necessary predicate for these changes, however, is the election of Barack Obama. If McCain wins, most young people do not believe much will change.

- Progressives need to continue to nurture young people's optimism about the possibility of change. The approach needs to be aspirational in the broad sense that things can be—will be—different and also make plain that absent the right outcome, absent the election of Barack Obama, real change is unlikely at best.



- At the same time, the approach needs to be grounded in the economic reality of this constituency. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the economy in engaging young people in this election. Obviously, almost every segment in the country will identify the economy as their leading concern. But for young people—many struggling with entry-level jobs with no benefits, many struggling with a crushing burden of debt, most struggling with a single income—the Bush economy has been particularly cruel. The approach here should be relentlessly pragmatic, stripped of flowery rhetoric and, most important, convey a sense of immediacy and urgency.
- Progressives cannot assume young people are immune from the same dynamics that are stirring the rest of the electorate. As noted, we see some defection among white Democrats and McCain outperforming Obama among partisans for the first time in this survey. (An Obama surge among white Independents disguises the impact). Obama will win this cohort decisively, but the margin and the turnout remain in question.
- Progressives need to continue to better define John McCain in this election cycle, particularly after his convention. If anything, the new polling in this period, including this project, underscores the need to draw sharper contrasts.

How to Survey Young People

This population is exceptionally difficult to reach through traditional polling methods. More important, traditional polling methods are no longer a reliable way of understanding America's young people. More than a quarter of young people do not have conventional land-line phones and many (49 percent in this survey) of those that have land-lines do not use them as their main service for incoming calls. This means that most will not be reached with a traditional land-line phone survey. Therefore, this project involves a multi-modal approach using web-based interviewing, cell phone interviewing, as well as a land-line sample.

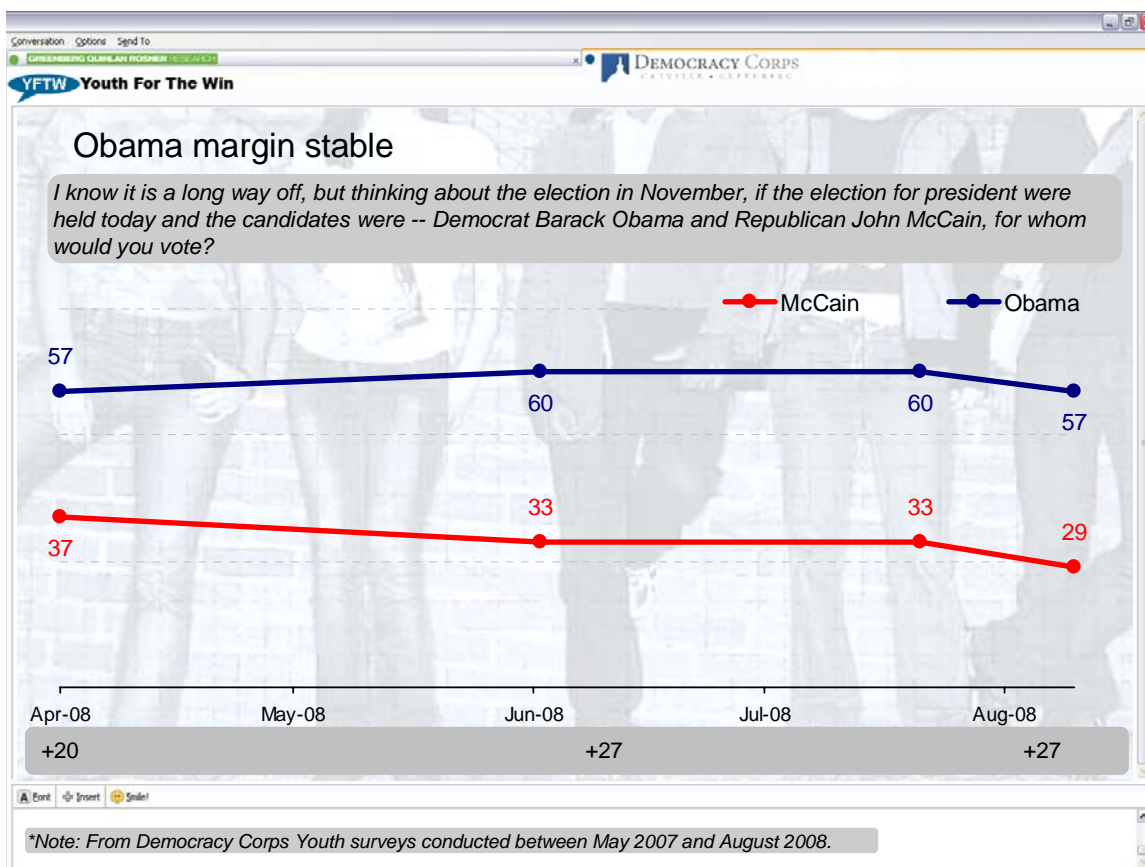
Moreover, as turn out represents such a critical variable in the political disposition of young people, this project does not screen for likely voters.

Between August 7 and 18, 2008, Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research interviewed 600 young people, ages 18-29. This project does not exclude non-voters or unlikely voters in order to look at the wider population of young people. It used a multi-mode design including 60 cell phone interviews, 300 web based interviews and 240 interviews using a random digit dial sample conducted over the telephone.



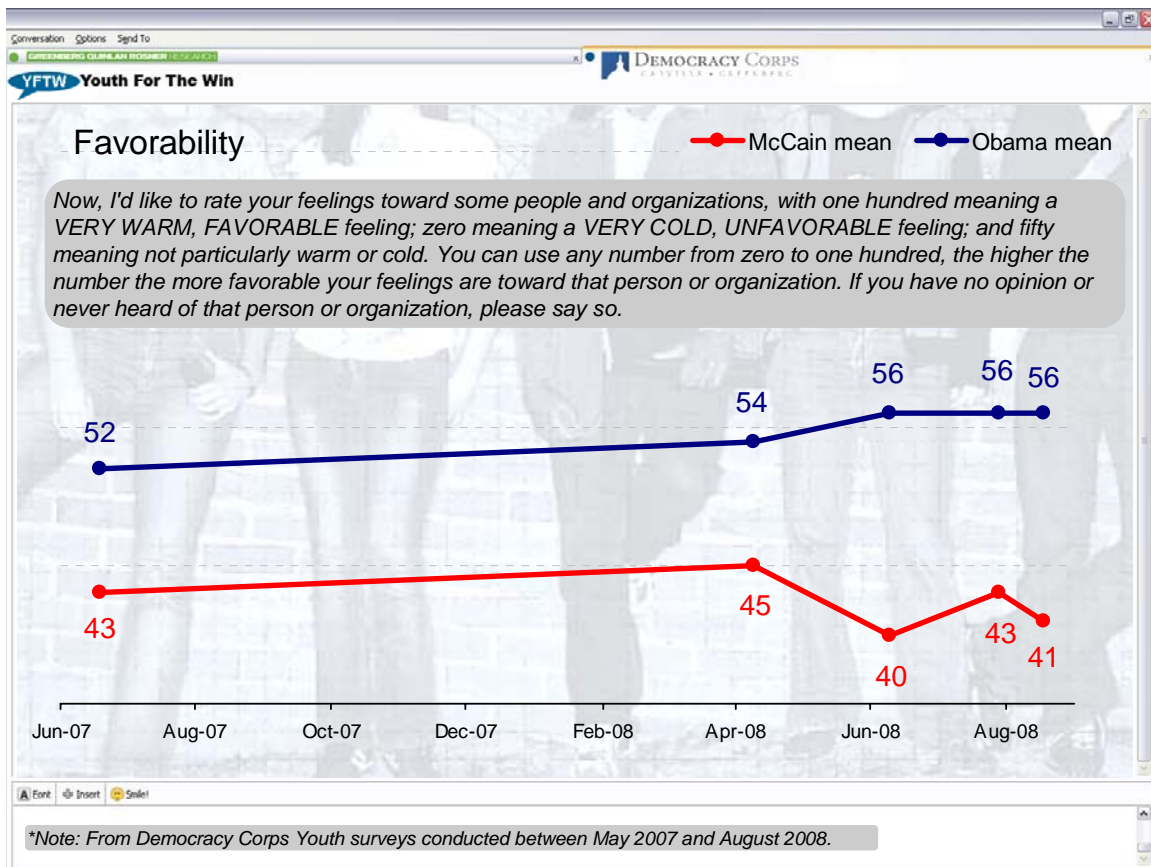
Obama Lead Stable

Barack Obama currently leads John McCain 57 to 29 percent; his support is even stronger among the young people most like to vote at 61 to 31 percent. This margin is stable, though after introducing third party candidates in appropriate states, support for both Obama and McCain drops some (Barr and Nader each draw 2 percent). Strong Obama groups include young people of color (80 percent Obama), students (68 percent Obama) and unmarried women (62 percent). In contrast, Obama slips below 50 percent among married women under 30 (just 47 percent).



Some concern emerges among white Democrats where Obama's support slips from 82 percent to 76 percent. For the first time, Obama does not match McCain's partisan support (McCain reaches 89 percent among white Republicans). At the same time, McCain collapses among white Independents (now 41 – 26 percent Obama); Barr and Nader together hold 11 percent of the white independent vote among youth.

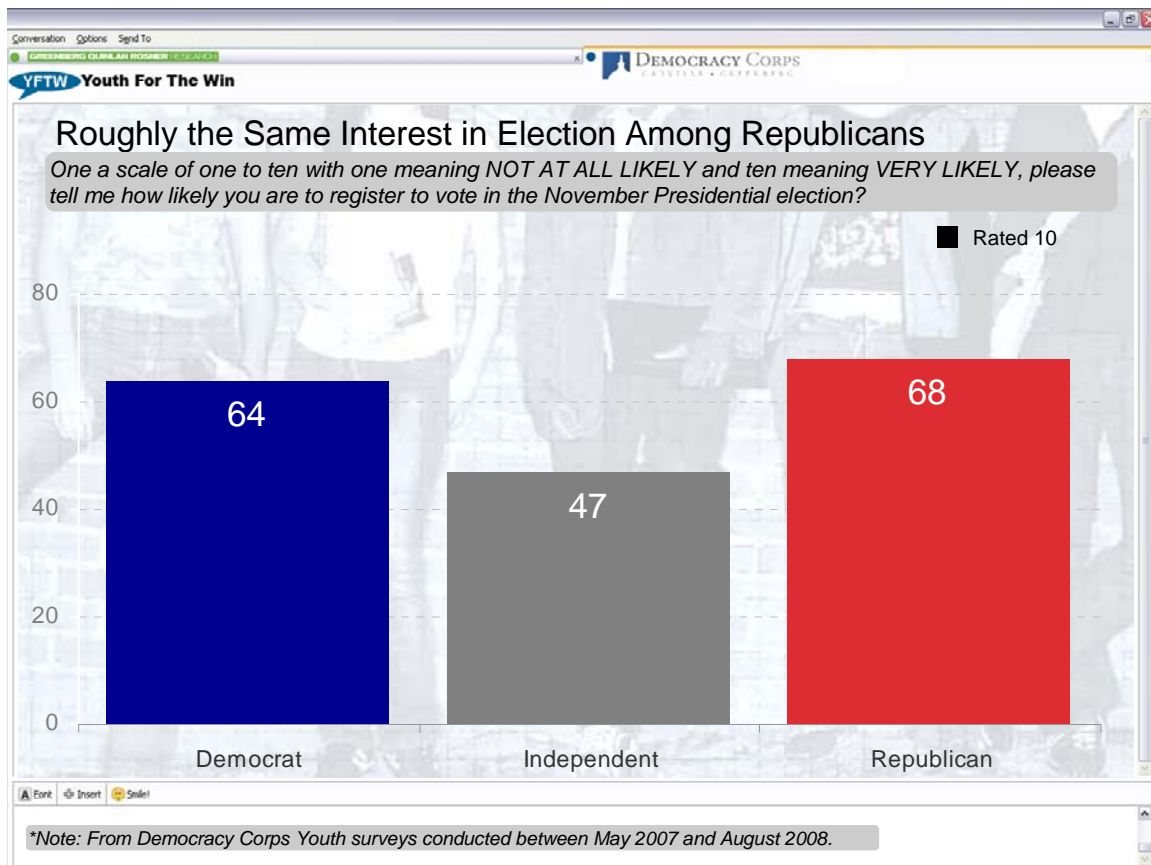
In national surveys, favorability ratings for both candidates have been declining with the heat of the election. Among youth, we do not see much change overall, though McCain's unfavorable ratings have crept up to 48 percent (45 percent last time).



Progressives need to continue to better define John McCain in this election cycle, particularly after his convention. If anything, the new polling in this period, including this project, underscores the need to draw sharper contrasts. But among youth, sustaining their belief that real change is possible, particularly when it comes to the economy, is also a critical priority.

Youth Remain Engaged, But Still Feel Ignored

Campaigns and outside groups invested millions this cycle courting the youth vote, studying their habits, how they communicate with each other, reaching them on-line and through wireless communication, tracking how they experience politics and finding sources they trust and distrust. And yet, a majority still feels like politicians do not listen to them. Young people may be the most fashionable voting block of the cycle, but they still feel like they are standing behind the velvet rope.



This sets up an interesting paradox where young people reflect historic levels of engagement, but a disconnection still emerges between the political class and Americans under 30. All told, a 51 percent majority of young people believe, “politicians are still not listening to the views and concerns of young people.” Just a third (33 percent) believe, “for the first time, it seems like politicians are listening to the views of young people.” Notably, Republican and conservative youth feel far more ignored than Democrats and liberals. Obama voters divide fairly even on this question (44 percent of politicians are listening, 46 percent politicians are not listening), while McCain voters feel slighted by a two-to-one margin (55 – 26 percent).

Despite these results, we have never recorded a higher level of vote intention among young people. Republican young people now post similar levels of enthusiasm for voting as Democratic young people (68 percent of Republicans describe their likelihood of voting as a “10” on a 10-point scale, compared to 64 percent among Democrats). Young people also agree, “I am more involved in this election than in previous elections,” (56 percent agree, 63 percent among non-white voters). Democrats (63 percent more involved) are more likely to agree than Republicans (53 percent), but an even bigger difference emerges among liberal Democrats (72 percent agree) compared to conservative Republicans (just 52 percent agree).

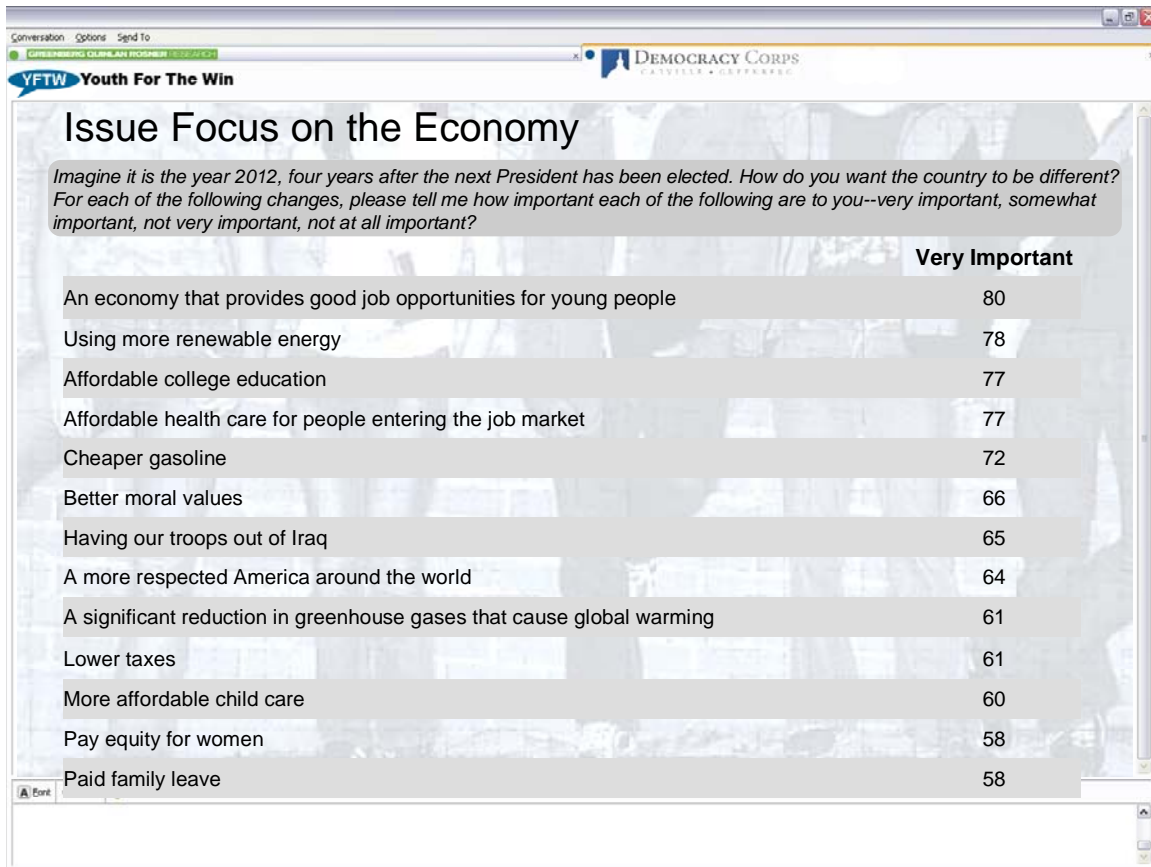


Youth Agenda

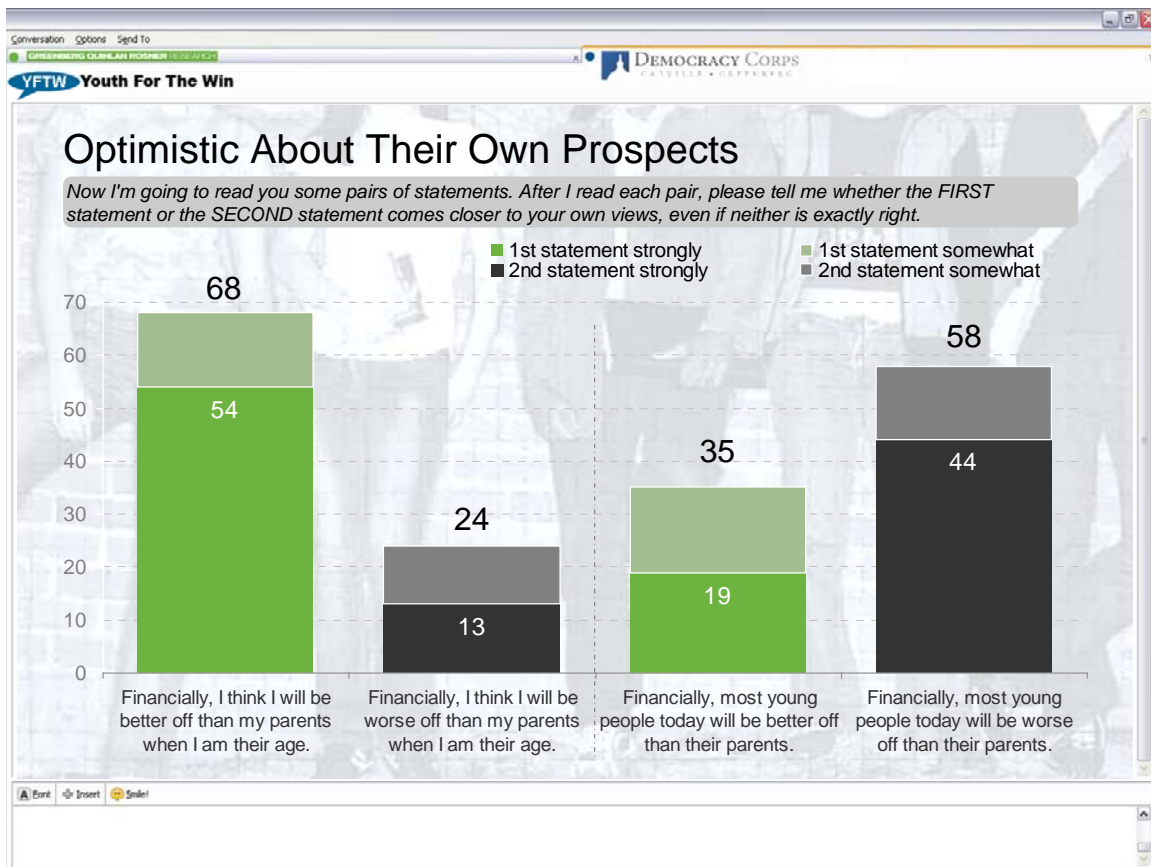
Young people's personal goals reflect their immediate, financial problems, rather than long-term personal, or even financial, growth. It speaks volumes about the current economic standing of this generation that more young people judge ridding themselves of debt more important than any other personal goal, including getting married, having children or buying a home. This is the leading goal for almost every segment of young people, including college educated and non-college youth alike. Having a family, getting married and becoming more spiritually fulfilled rank last on this list. Just 44 percent of unmarried women believe getting married is very important, compared to 73 percent among women with partners.



Not surprisingly, then, young people's goals for the nation also focus on the economy. The most important change they identify is "an economy that provides good job opportunities for young people." The leading five items all touch on the economy and economic squeeze in some fashion or the other. The Iraq issue, which led young people to turn out the Republican congressional majority by a 60 to 38 margin in 2006, finds a place in the middle of this list.



In focus groups, young people will talk at length about their ambition, particularly their financial ambition. Many hold multiple jobs; many talk about plans for getting more education. While young people do not believe their generation will be better off than their parents' generation, they firmly believe they, themselves, will enjoy a better life than their parents.



Hope in Obama

These troubled economic circumstances have not sapped young people's hope—young people believe change is possible. A 64 percent majority of voters, for example, believe that by the year 2012, there will be an economy in this country that provides good jobs for young people. Even 56 percent believe gas will be cheaper. They also believe the necessary antecedent for this change is the election of Barack Obama in November.

We asked young people how likely change would be if either Obama or McCain were elected. With the exception of lower taxes, a majority of young people believe Obama can affect change in each issue tested. They are most confident in his first promise, getting troops out of Iraq, but they also invest hope in Obama's ability to change the economy, change the health care system and change our energy policy.

Young people do not afford John McCain the same confidence. It is notable, however, that on the economy and energy, a slim majority of young people believe McCain can change things. The former reflects a significant problem progressives face in the broader electorate—the inability of Obama or Democrats to dominate the economy, an extraordinary outcome, all things considered. The later finding reflects the progressive failure to effectively engage Republicans on energy and drilling.



Issue	Very Important	Likely if Obama elected	Likely if McCain elected	Obama-McCain
An economy that provides good job opportunities for young people	80	64	53	11
Using more renewable energy	78	72	55	17
Affordable health care for people entering the job market	77	70	44	26
Affordable college education	77	60	44	16
Cheaper gasoline	72	56	43	13
Better moral values	66	56	52	4
Having our troops out of Iraq	65	76	37	39
A more respected America around the world	64	65	50	15
A significant reduction in greenhouse gases that cause global warming	61	57	42	15
Lower taxes	61	47	42	5
More affordable child care	60	59	45	14
Pay equity for women	58	60	42	18
Paid family leave	56	60	43	17

Conclusion

The McCain campaign started their assault on Obama by suggesting his candidacy represented nothing but uplifting speeches. He was the “The One” who was all marketing and no substance. Among young people at least, this assault has not proven effective because young people’s support and enthusiasm for Barack Obama is based on something real. They sincerely believe he can change things. In his candidacy, they have invested their hope, specifically, their hope for an improved economy.