



Date: August 7, 2008

To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

From: Stan Greenberg and James Carville, Democracy Corps  
Anna Greenberg and David Walker, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

## Economy Key to Maintaining Youth Vote

*Youth for the Win!*

---

The last six weeks saw the inauguration of a serious, McCain-sponsored offensive against Barack Obama, as well as an effort in the Obama campaign to “moderate” their candidate. And, at least among youth, the impact of these events has been notably modest. While we see some movement in Obama’s support among young people of color growing even stronger and softening a bit among white youth, overall this has been a period of remarkable political stability. Obama consolidated some of the gains we saw in the June survey and still posts a convincing 27-point margin (60 – 33 percent) over McCain.

John McCain recovers somewhat from his post-primary nadir among youth, arguably highlighting a political price for the progressive failure so far to really define this candidate, but in their enthusiasm for Obama and their commitment to vote, young people have not changed. Most indicators still suggest both a record turn out and margin in November.

Locking this down means engaging youth more forcefully on the economy.

In our report a year ago, we argued that speaking to youth on the economy was the key to expanding this vote. As a more economically vulnerable demographic group—often competing for entry-level jobs with limited benefits, most surviving on a single income—young people then represented a “canary in a coal mine” of sorts for the rest of the electorate, previewing a broader concern over the economy. In our survey last month, we argued that targeting McCain’s economic proposals—and tying McCain to Bush—were the keys to further poisoning young people’s perceptions of this incumbent.

In this survey, we explore more directly the current economic stress of America’s youth. Nearly half are a missed pay-check away from having to borrow money. Three-quarters owe some manner of debt, including a third who owe student loans. And one in five has had a utility cut off for failure to pay a bill.

- Not surprisingly then, pro-Obama arguments that explicitly address the economy find the most traction in this survey. Without question, there are other aspects of this



nomination that young people find appealing, not least of which is Obama's clarion call for fundamental change and hope. But the core stake young people have in this election is economic in nature.

- So far, the economic debate has centered on oil, the mortgage crisis, trade, the deficit and taxes. These are important issues for young people, particularly gas prices, but they do not always reflect the every day economic reality of young people. Young people face an often staggering amount of (non-mortgage) debt, compete for entry-level jobs without good benefits, struggle to afford health insurance and most must survive on a single income.
- John McCain sees some improvement in his standing among young people compared to the last survey. This is not to say that he is popular or that he fully recovered from the drop we recorded in July, but he has improved, particularly among white youth. This may reflect a political price progressives are paying for failing so far to really define McCain.
- The drilling issue remains a challenging issue for progressives. Even this population, the most "green" of any generation in the electorate, splits evenly on the issue of oil drilling in coastal areas.

### 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 (67 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.

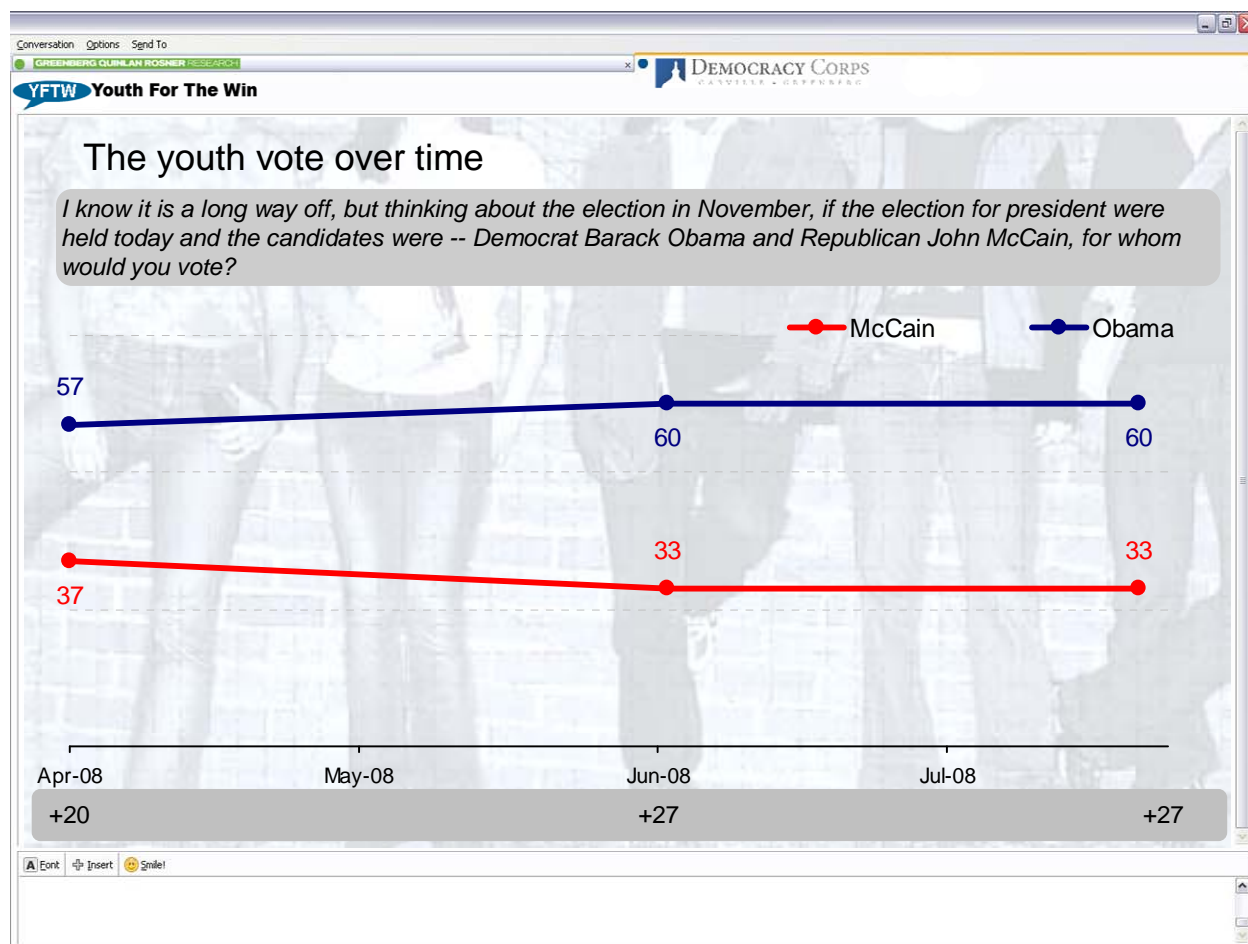
Moreover, as turn out represents such a critical variable in the political disposition of young people, this project does not screen for likely voters.

Between June 15 and June 29, 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 Holds Gains

From the pre-nomination period (April) to the immediate post-nomination period (June), Obama expanded his lead among young people from 19 points to 27 points. This survey shows that lead stabilized, as Obama currently dominates McCain 60 – 33 percent among young people. Historically, this lead exceeds Kerry’s margin among youth (54 – 45 percent) and reflects the Democratic Congressional margin in 2006.

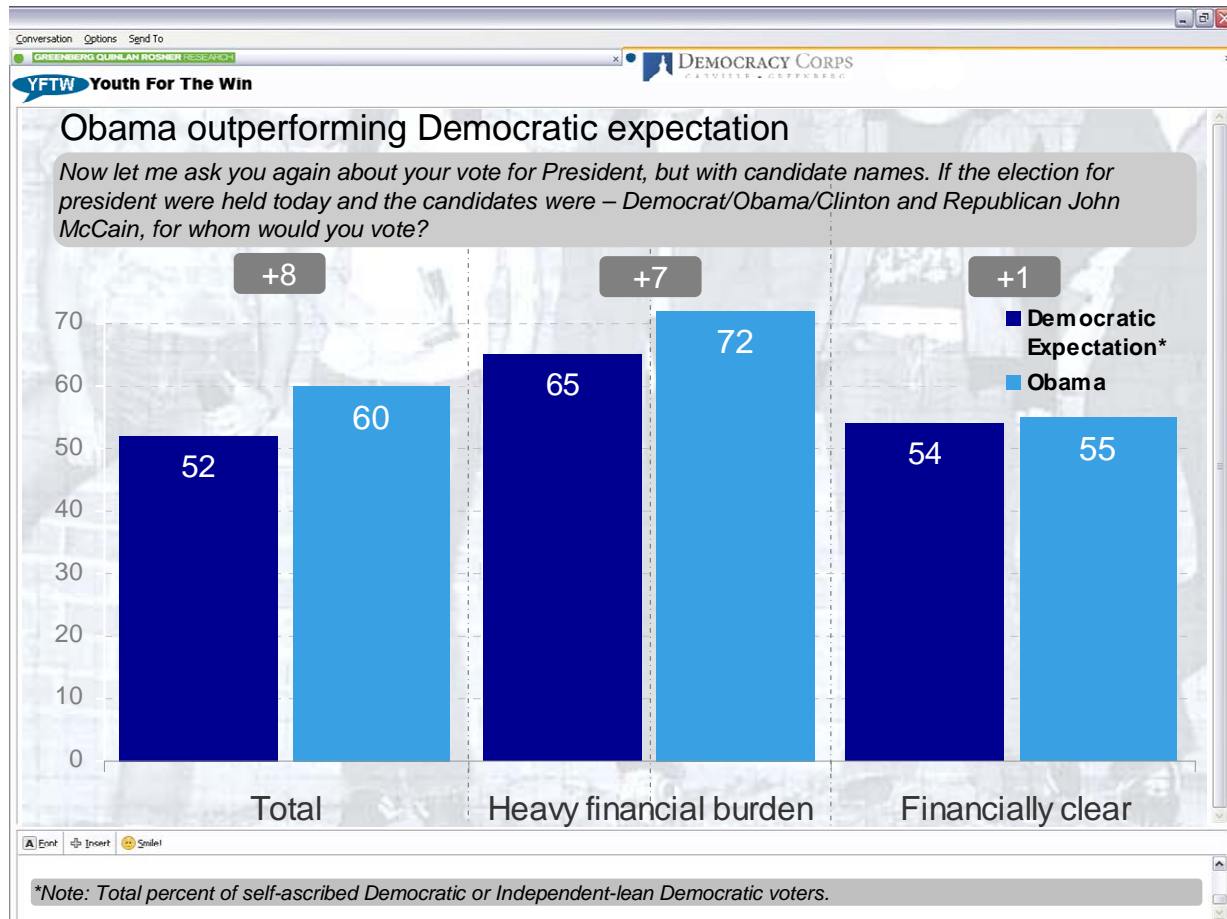


Obama’s margin does not change much among likely voters (61 – 34 percent). We see some polarization along racial lines, as white youth withdraw somewhat (from a 51 – 42 percent Obama lead to a 46 – 45 statistical tie) while young people of color deliver an even higher margin (now 80 percent Obama, up from 74 percent) for this historic candidacy. More specific problems emerge among white men and white Democrats, as well as voters in the Central and West regions, where much of the anti-Obama television has occurred. Most of these losses are modest and do not yet represent a significant trend given the overall stability of Obama’s standing among youth.

Young people under significant economic stress clearly look for alternatives to this Republican economy. Obama’s margin balloons to 41 percent among young people with four or



more forms of debt (student loans, credit cards, medical bills, etc.) and to 54 percent among voters facing a heavy financial stress. Some of this trend, of course, reflects a more Democratic outlook among more lower income young people, but Obama's margin exceeds Democratic expectations among financially stressed youth; among financially clear young people, Obama's margin just meets Democratic expectations.



### McCain Let Up Off the Mat, Obama Remains Strong

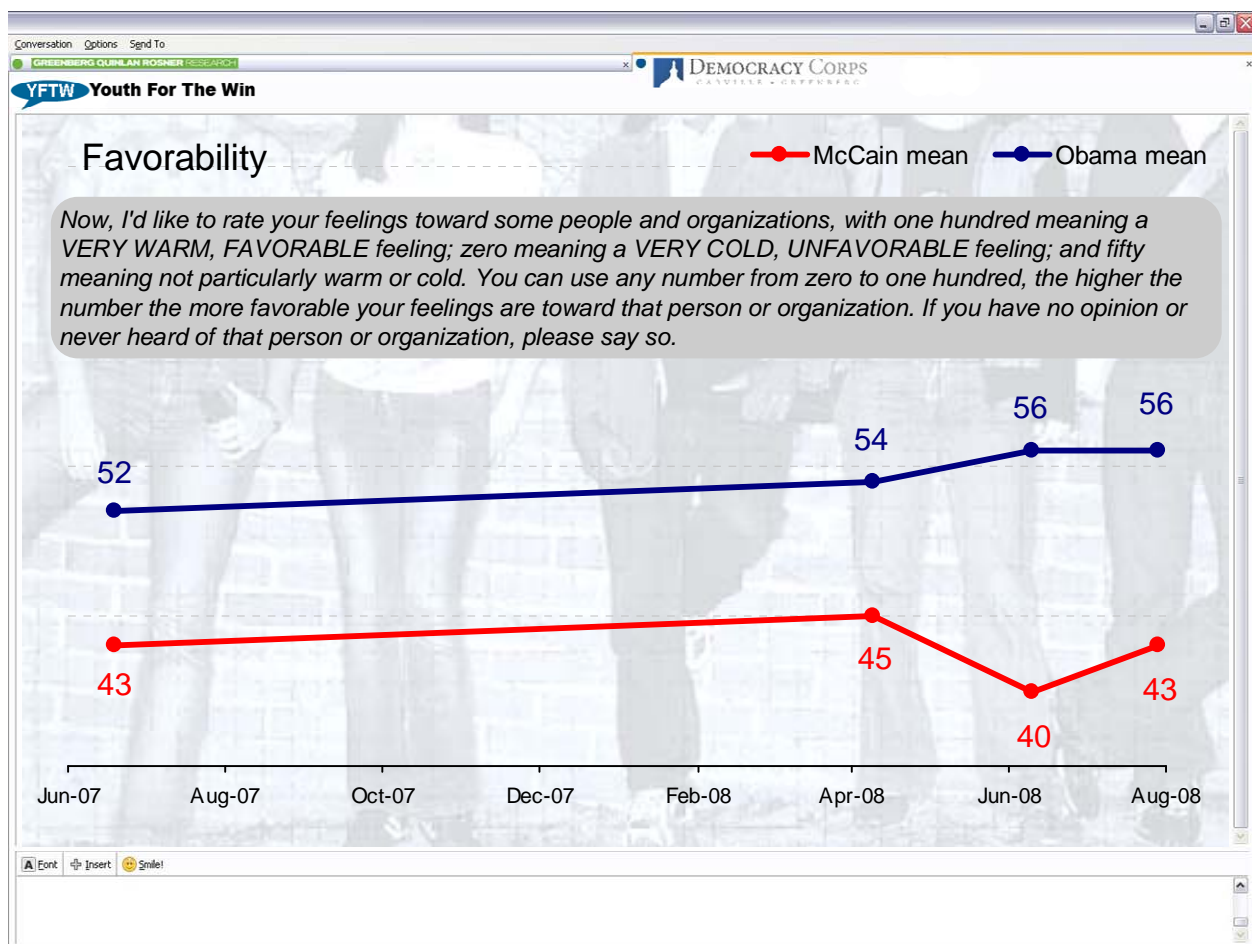
John McCain posts a very slight recovery in favorability among young people. This reflects, in part, some improvement in the Republican brand which remains severely damaged, but not quite as disastrous as was the case in July. Both the favorability ratings for Bush and for the Republican Party show some murmurs of life after collapsing in our last survey. It is also at least arguable that progressives are missing their opportunity to define the Republican candidate.

Overall, John McCain's favorability scores improve from 30 percent favorable, 49 percent unfavorable to 34 percent favorable, 45 percent unfavorable, an 8-point net swing. It is important to remember that McCain once enjoyed reasonably strong 35 favorable, 37 percent unfavorable marks in April, so the "improvement" here is only relative to his appalling



performance in the July survey. Still, this improvement comes among both Democrats and Independents (not among, interestingly, Republicans) and among white youth, he moves to even favorable (41 percent) and unfavorable (40 percent) marks.

Obama's are steady at 56 percent favorable, 34 percent unfavorable, though among white youth, he slips from 45 – 37 percent favorable to 45 – 44 percent favorable.



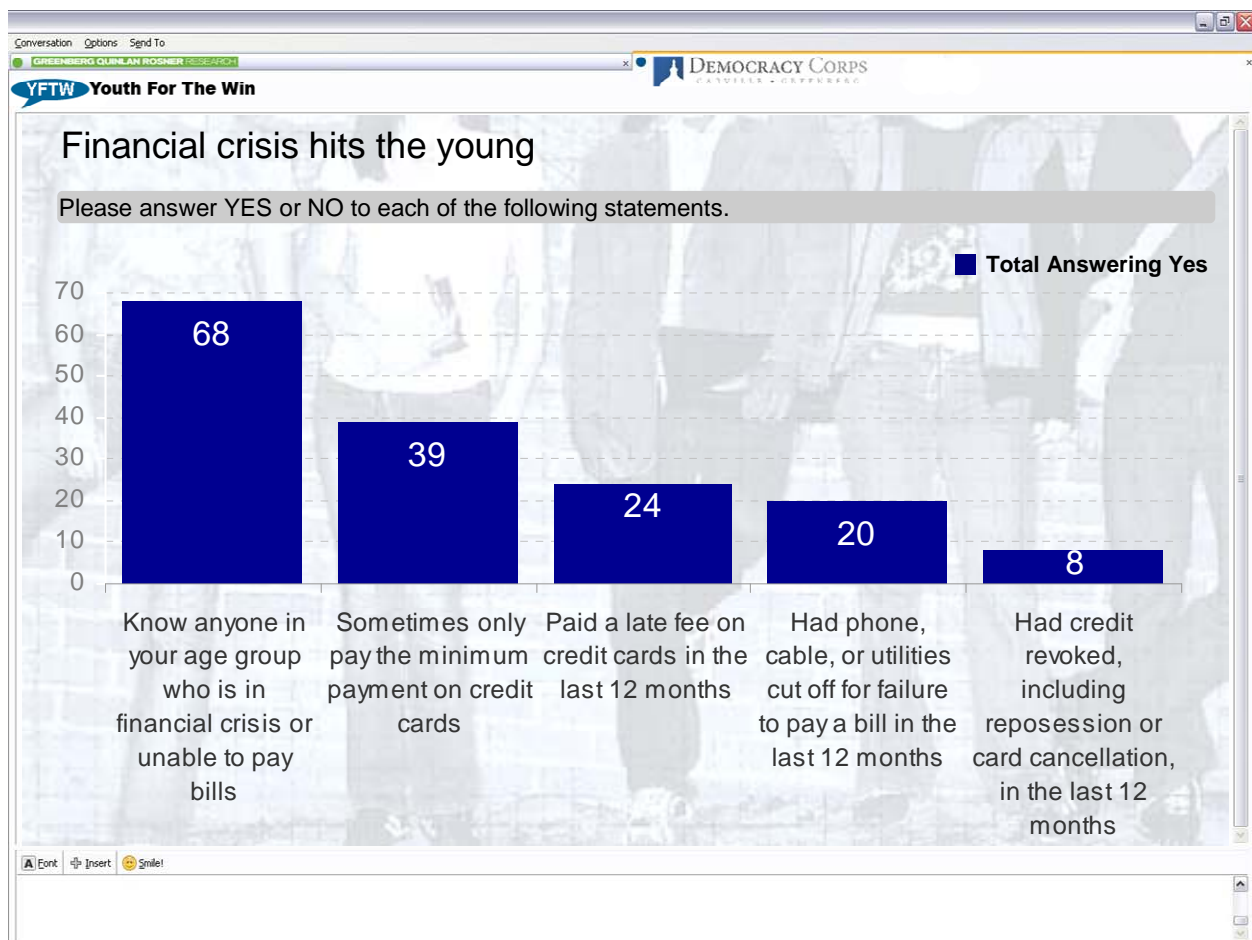
### Youth Under Economic Stress

Nearly half (47 percent) say they are one paycheck away from having to borrow money from credit cards or from their parents to make ends meet. Even among Republicans (47 percent), full-time workers (46 percent), white college educated youth (42 percent) and married young people (41 percent), there emerges considerable economic instability.

Much of the problem is rooted in debt. All told, 76 percent of young people hold some type of debt and a third (32 percent) are still paying off their student loans. While young people who face severe economic crises such as having their utilities cut off or losing credit, etc. remain a minority, seven in ten young people at least know someone close to the financial brink.



Gas prices are, of course, a major concern among young people. In a recent survey of youth that GQR conducted for Qvisory, young people identified gas prices as their leading financial concern. This is also an issue where McCain and Republicans have, at least, an argument. Young people in this survey divide evenly on whether drilling for coastal oil is a good idea (44 percent say this drilling will hurt the environment and not help with gas prices; 44 percent say it is a good idea and will decrease gas prices). Even among liberal Democrats, only 51 percent support the environmental position here. Among young people facing a heavy financial burden—an overwhelmingly Democratic group (58 percent Democratic, just 16 percent Republican)—nearly 48 percent believe drilling in coastal regions is a good idea.



Progressives need to focus more on how young people experience the economy directly. Generally speaking, young people do not hear the kind of economic policies that can make a real difference in their lives. The price of gas issue is but one example. It is also about debt, about the policies that allow them to purchase affordable health care and about opportunities for good paying, entry level jobs.



## Obama Messaging

There is no doubt that Obama appeals to this generation of voters, but there has been relatively little exploration of why young people like Obama and what they want to hear from him. Obama is closer in age to young people and his ethnicity better reflects the diversity of this generation. He also generally shares the more progressive political outlook of young people. Young people voted Democratic well before they ever heard of Obama. The candidate's soaring speeches and calls for change also inspire young people. But in the end, it is not rhetoric or even relative youth that young people want to see out of this candidacy, but very tactile change, specifically changes in the economy.

Given the financial vulnerability of this population, it is not surprising to see pro-Obama arguments focused on the economy finding the most traction in this survey. This messaging takes pains to speak to the specific economic concerns of young people, including debt, the cost of education and finding entry-level jobs with decent salaries and benefits. A health care argument that includes specific proposals for young people—such as allowing them to continue on their parents' insurance—also resonates, as does an argument about gas prices. This latter argument needs to be sharpened, but it is interesting that a gas argument is (arguably) distracted by the global warming issue and loses some of its intensity. Arguments that are more rhetorical in nature fall short.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with a survey titled "Obama Positives Top Tier". The survey is presented in a table with three columns: a description of the message, "Much More Likely", and "Total More Likely". The browser's address bar shows "GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSENBERG RESEARCH" and the Democracy Corps logo is visible in the top right corner of the page.

	Much More Likely	Total More Likely
Barack Obama says too many young people today struggle to get by, trying to make ends meet with low wage jobs, a rising cost of living and often significant debt. He will work to reduce the debt load young people carry by taking on abusive credit card company practices and provide more scholarships and low interest loans so that young people can get an education without a crushing burden of debt.	42	64
Barack Obama says too many young people today struggle to get by, trying to make ends meet with low wage jobs, a rising cost of living and often significant debt. He will fight for policies that help young people find jobs with decent salaries, good benefits, and affordable health insurance programs	42	60
Barack Obama will reform our healthcare system to guarantee that every American has affordable health insurance. His plan will lower healthcare costs, make it easier for younger people entering the job market to afford health insurance and allow young people to continue on their parents' insurance plan.	39	59
Barack Obama will fight to lower gas prices by cracking down on oil speculators and price gougers that may be breaking the law, taxing excess oil profits to invest in alternative energy and encouraging energy conservation through tax cuts for families that take steps to save energy.	36	58
Barack Obama argues that even though gas prices are high, we cannot retreat from our fight with global warming. He will work to lower gas prices by cracking down on excess oil profits, but will also invest in alternative energy like wind and solar, take concrete steps to reduce carbon emissions, require 25 percent of our electricity to come from renewable sources and cut our oil use by 35 percent.	33	57



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following elements:

- Address bar: Conversation Options Send To
- Page Title: GREENBERG CLIMBLAN ROSNER RESEARCH
- Page Header: YFTW Youth For The Win
- Page Header: DEMOCRACY CORPS
- Section Title: Obama Positives Bottom Tier
- Table with 3 columns: Description, Much More Likely, Total More Likely
- Footer: Font Insert Smile!

	Much More Likely	Total More Likely
Barack Obama opposes Bush's failed policies in Iraq. This war cost us thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, money that could have gone to creating jobs, improving education or investments in alternative energy. He will bring our troops home in 16 months.	30	51
Barack Obama opposed the Iraq war from the very beginning, even when most politicians supported it, and said it would distract from the war in Afghanistan and the effort to stop al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. He will bring our troops home in 16 months.	31	48
Obama is uniquely qualified to bring Americans together after a period of deep division. The son of a black man and a white woman, Obama sees different points of view and understands people of all backgrounds. He does not see things as black or white, or right or left and will work across party lines to bring real change to Washington.	31	48
Barack Obama strongly believes in giving individuals the freedom to make up their own decisions about their lives. He strongly supports a woman's right to choose to have an abortion, believes the Internet should remain free of censorship and supports efforts to open-up the military to lesbian and gays.	30	47
Barack Obama has helped restore our American democracy. He has made people believe that we can change our country's direction and energized young people to participate in politics who previously seemed to give up on democracy.	26	47

Exploring arguments in both this survey (pro-Obama) and the last survey (anti-McCain), we can develop a quick message box that summarizes major points of contrast between these two candidates. Notably, this economic narrative dominates both the positive outreach among youth, as well as the attack on McCain.



<i>Obama Positive</i>	<i>McCain Hits</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obama says too many young people are struggling just to get by; he will fight for policies that help young people by reducing the burden of debt, creating jobs with good salaries and benefits and affordable health care.</li><li>• Obama will reform health care, lowering costs, making it easier for younger workers to get health insurance and allowing young people to continue on their parents' insurance plans.</li><li>• Obama will fight for new energy policies to make us energy independent, increase jobs and lower the price of gas; he will end tax breaks for big oil and invest in clean, renewable sources of energy, increase American oil production, crack down on oil speculators and price gougers.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Despite the economic problems young people face, McCain opposes the very programs that can help young people get by, like education, health care and housing assistance.</li><li>• McCain's support of the Bush agenda will burden generations to come; from the war, to the economy, to the national debt, today's young people will inherit huge problems from the Republican leadership.</li><li>• McCain supports giving Bush a blank check in Iraq, nearly \$10 billion a month, money that could be used investing in the next generation, building schools, investing in alternative energy and creating jobs.</li></ul>

## Conclusion

Obama has survived McCain's initial blast and accusations of "moving to the center" with little apparent damage among youth. Electorally, the gains we saw in the last wave of research have held and currently reflect historical Democratic gains in the youth vote.

Despite the apparent stability in the vote, most national campaigns are not static by nature; a number of big things, a gaffe, a debate, an external event, can change things in hurry. The softness we see in Obama's white support could be a blip or could be portent.

Maintaining or even expanding the youth vote means speaking to their biggest issue—their real financial challenges. Arguably, neither Obama nor McCain has directly addressed their economic concerns in a fashion that meets young people where they are in their lives. It is about holding McCain accountable for the current economy (see last Youth For The Win report) and providing an alternative that can have a direct impact on their lives and economic standing. In our next report, we will look specifically at what young people believe is at stake in this election and what they hope to change in this country.