



Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Democracy Corps

Youth for the Win!

# Rising Wave Among Young People

[www.greenbergresearch.com](http://www.greenbergresearch.com)

Washington, DC  
10 G Street, NE  
Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20002

Phone: +1 202 478 8300  
Fax: +1 202 478 8301

California  
388 Market Street  
Suite 860  
San Francisco, CA 94111

Phone: +1 415 986 9100  
Fax: +1 415 986 9101

**GREENBERG QUINLAN ROSNER** RESEARCH

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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

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

## **The Rising Wave Among Young People**

*Youth for the Win!*

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Democracy Corps' tracking of young voters reveals dramatic movement in the vote for president at the conclusion of the primaries. Democratic support among America's youth now reaches 2006 levels, not only in the generic vote for president, which has been true for some time, but also in the named trial heat. Obama now beats McCain 60 to 33 percent in a named ballot for President, a margin that echoes the Democratic advantage in the 2006 congressional elections (60 – 38 percent).

Critically, the Democratic advantage balloons among young people most likely to vote. Among core voters—young people with some vote history—and among young people who describe their likelihood of voting as a ten on a ten-point scale, Obama's vote share reaches 66 percent.

These outcomes reflect three distinct but complementary trends. Since our last look at the youth vote two months ago, Obama consolidated the Democratic base and improved among groups that, in the broader electorate, sometimes proved elusive in the primary, groups like white women, Hispanics and even blue collar voters. At the same time, we see a near-disintegration of the Republican brand among youth. Since our first report in 2007, this series has chronicled the profound alienation of America's youth from the Grand Old Party in both quantitative studies and focus groups. This study shows the problem growing dramatically worse. That has now been accompanied by a crash of the "McCain brand" among young voters, turning sharply negative over the last two months.

Young people also remain engaged. While this survey shows a small drop in the number of young people saying they are "very likely" to vote (rating their likelihood to vote a ten on a ten-point scale), the erosion reflects diminished engagement among Republican-leaning youth. Among Democrats and liberals, young people remain enthusiastic about participating in the 2008 elections.

There is no indication in this survey that the Democratic vote "maxes out" among youth. While Obama stands close to his ceiling among Democrats, there is still room to grow his vote among young Independents and other groups that still show some scarring from the primary, principally married women and "older" (ages 24 to 29) white women.



In future projects, we will look at themes and issues to maintain young people's enthusiasm and invest them further in Democratic candidates. Here we focus on McCain. Two powerful themes emerge that can potentially grow the Democratic margin. The first is linking him more firmly to Bush—a process that has already started. For youth, this is a generational argument. It is about the Bush legacy—leaving the next generation to deal with an endless war, a mountain of debt, a shattered economy—and McCain's complicity and continued advocacy of those policies.

Progressives also need to address more specifically the current economic reality young people face. Most focus groups these days are dominated by economic problems, but among young people, this problem is particularly acute. Many young people face all the same economic burdens other people face, such as rising gas prices, but these issues are compounded by the scant employee benefits typically provided entry-level workers, higher levels of debt and student loans, the burden of living (mostly) on a single income and an economy which often fails to provide jobs in the fields in which they trained. Young people are not amused when they learn about McCain's plan to cut further some of the programs that could potentially help them.

- 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 Republican leadership.
- Despite the economic problems young people face, McCain supports cuts in the very programs that can help young people get by, like education, health care and housing assistance.
- 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.



### 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 (46 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 May 29 and June 10, 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.

### **Tracking Youth Turnout and Engagement**

In the primary period, a record 6.5 million young people voted according to data compiled by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). This enthusiasm is almost certain to translate into a historic level of turnout in November. Currently, 49 percent of young people describe themselves as very likely to vote (rating their likelihood of voting a "10" on a ten-point scale) and 69 percent describe themselves as likely to vote (rating their likelihood of voting as and 8, 9 or 10).<sup>1</sup>

Compared to earlier in the year, young people indicate less likelihood of voting (from 54 percent very likely to vote to 49 percent very likely to vote). This decline reflects diminished engagement among Republican-leaning youth, once very impressive. Among Democrats and Independents such deterioration does not emerge.

There is no question that Obama will carry young people and with a comfortable margin. Progressives need to do everything they can to increase that margin, but arguably the bigger challenge is maintaining the trend among youth turnout. A significant number of groups, most non-partisan, are actively engaged in this challenge and doing good work. In future research, this

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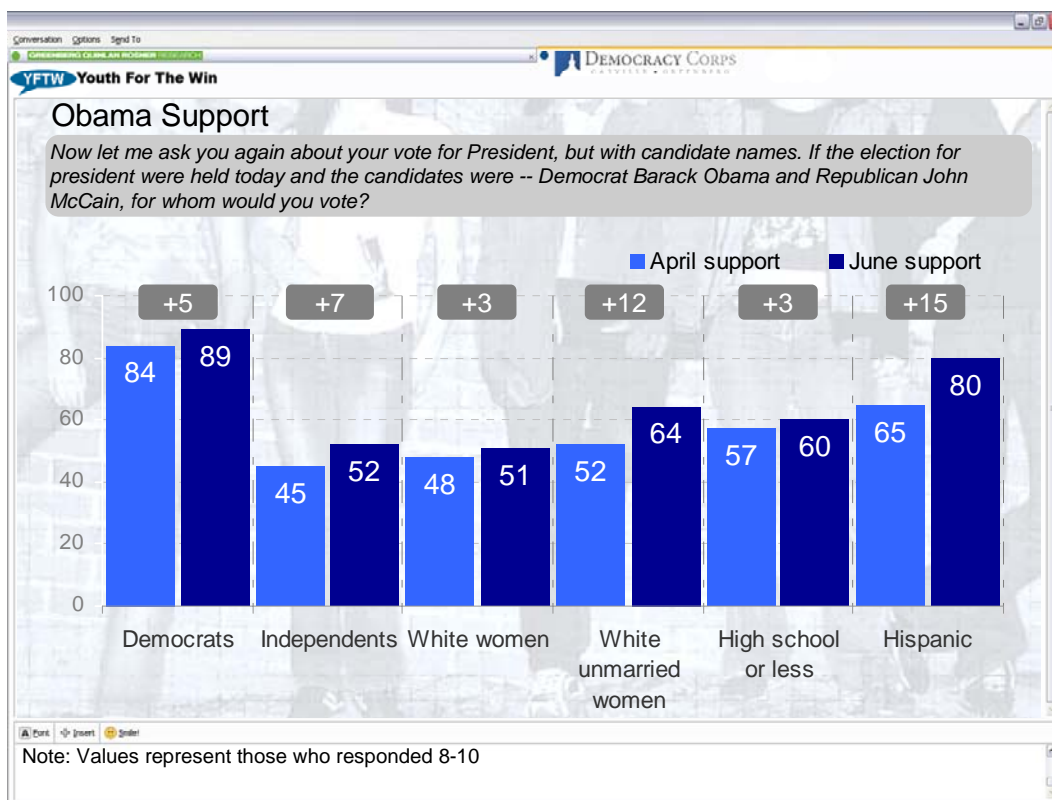
<sup>1</sup> Respondents, of course, overstate vote intentions on a survey, but as a relative measure tracking enthusiasm over time, stated vote intention has internal validity. Note that 36 percent of young people voted in the 2000 election and 47 percent voted in the 2004 election.



special series of Democracy Corps surveys will also look at positive themes and issues designed to energize the youth vote.

### Obama Consolidating the Youth Vote

Barack Obama now holds a 60 to 33 percent lead over John McCain with young people in this country. Among young voters most likely to vote, this lead jumps to 66 – 33 percent. Historically, these margins exceed Kerry’s showing in 2004 (54 – 45 percent) and echo the young people’s revolt against the Republican Congress in 2006 (60 – 38 percent). In claiming the nomination, Obama managed to consolidate Democrats and improve his showing among voting blocs that, at the national level, often preferred Hillary Clinton.



Many public polls have noted the gap between Obama’s support and the support voters might give a generic (unnamed) Democratic candidate. Theories about the causes for this gap range from some not-so-hidden racial prejudices to the ability of McCain to escape some of the negative associations applied to his party. But among young people, this gap is barely in evidence. Young people support an unnamed Democratic candidate with 62 percent of the vote; they support Obama with 60 percent of the vote. Some gaps emerge, most notably among older (24-29 year old) white women (59 percent for the Democratic candidate, 47 percent for Obama) and married women (58 percent for the Democratic candidate, 48 percent for Obama). This may be where the strain of the primary is slower to subside.

But Obama’s overall favorability among younger women improves. Among younger white women in particular he has moved from a somewhat mixed 37 percent favorable, 43



percent unfavorable score to a much improved 43 percent warm-35 percent cool number. Among younger unmarried women, he jumps from 48 percent favorable to 57 percent favorable. Young Hispanic voters reflect an even more dramatic gain for this nominee (from 43 percent favorable to 58 percent favorable).

Young voters helped deliver this nomination to Obama, but in our last survey, we highlighted evidence that the long-contested primary had the potential to undermine the Democrats' margin among youth voters. Not all the wounds have healed entirely, but this potential problem has diminished. The gains we see in Obama's favorability among younger women are particularly impressive. At the same time, the improvements we see in the horse race reflect a wholesale collapse of Republican support among young people.

### **McCain: Less Maverick, More Republican**

John McCain never boasted great numbers, but he once enjoyed a reputation among young people as a maverick, an independent and someone willing to buck his party, traits esteemed by this generation. This profile has withered as McCain's brand and the Republican brand not only merge, but show the same downward trajectory.

John McCain moves from a mixed 34 percent positive, 37 percent negative thermometer rating in April to a 30 percent positive, 49 percent negative rating now. He still stands taller than Bush, but his numbers almost mirror the standing of the Republican Party.

Part of this reflects a natural polarization in the post-nomination period, as Democrats stop fighting each other and turn toward the GOP. McCain's unfavorable rating among Democrats jumped 11 points (to 65 percent). He also drops among Independents (from 33 percent favorable, 27 percent unfavorable to 28 percent favorable, 49 percent unfavorable), moderates (from 34 – 35 percent to 37 – 43 percent), non-college youth (from 35 – 36 percent to 24 – 46 percent) and collapses among Hispanics (from 39 percent to 70 percent unfavorable).<sup>2</sup>

In our report last time, we argued that the one key to weakening this nominee and his (then) unusually strong support for a Republican was tying him more to Bush and the Republican party brand. This process is well underway and McCain's efforts in recent advertising and outreach to distance himself from Bush have failed, at least among young people.

### **The Crash of the Republican Brand**

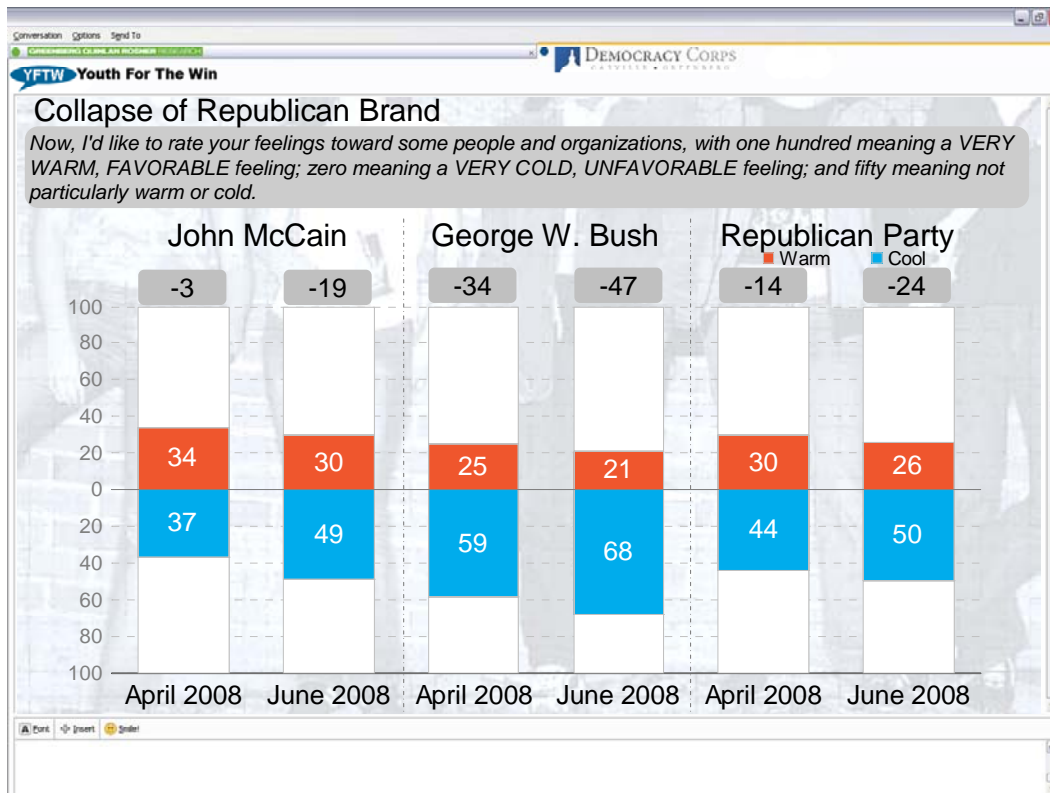
The Republican brand was so diminished among young people it was not clear it could crash further. But it did. On every metric, from the support for the President, to the favorability of the party, to the generic support for a Republican candidate for President, Republicans have suffered serious erosion among young people in the last two months.

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<sup>2</sup> The sample size for Hispanics is less than 100 cases, so that while it is likely McCain dropped among Hispanic youth, the movement here is almost certainly less dramatic than represented in this survey.



Fully half (50 percent) of young people now describe their feelings toward the Republican party in negative terms, up six points from April.<sup>3</sup> George Bush suffers an even more violent crash (now 68 percent negative, up from 59 percent).



Even ideologically, young people move to a more progressive disposition as self-ascribed liberal numbers reach 32 percent (up from 27 percent) and self-ascribed conservative numbers fall to 22 percent (down from 29 percent in April).

As previously reported, in focus groups young people’s alienation from the Republicans does not rest entirely on frustration with Republican governance. To be sure the war and, particularly, the economy are the starting point for their criticism, but it is also deeper than that. It relates to a core disagreement over Republican/conservative values, world-view and role of government. Young people support a more activist government, but also a government that gives its citizens the freedom to make personal choices. In this survey, however, another theme to emerge is the sense among young people that they will spend the rest of their lives paying for the mistakes of the current generation of Republicans.

<sup>3</sup> Republicans are not only struggling among youth; their favorability ratings are only marginally better among the general electorate (32 percent positive – 48 percent negative in the May Democracy Corps national survey of likely voters).



### Binding McCain to the Bush-Republican Brand

In further undermining McCain, messaging which glues McCain to the Bush legacy finds the most traction, particularly if framed in generational terms. This is not simply talking about the 95 percent of time “McCain voted with Bush” or simply drawing parallels in their records and positions, but indicting Bush and McCain for bequeathing such a sorry legacy to the next generation of Americans.

Anti-McCain youth messaging must also recognize the significant economic stress of young people these days. An argument that demonstrates McCain’s insensitivity and alienation from this economic stress and support for policies that deepen the problem also find considerable traction here. And, of course, the Iraq war remains a critical proof-point for young people of McCain’s unfitness for this office. The war is at the root of young people’s revolt against the Republicans in 2006; while it may be displaced by the economy as a leading concern, it remains central to their Republican critique.

	Very Serious Doubts	Total Serious Doubts
Despite the challenges facing young people today trying to find a good paying job, McCain says that if elected president he would cut billions of dollars from education programs like early childhood education and affordable student loans.	39	66
Most young people rely on their employers to help provide health insurance, but John McCain's health care plan would eliminate the system where employers provide health care and require individuals to buy their own insurance; it would also give insurance companies the power to inflate their profits by allowing them to deny coverage.	37	64
McCain supports the Bush policy agenda that will burden generations to come. He supports Bush's Iraq policy and consistently advocated sending even more money and troops to Iraq; on the economy, he supports Bush's tax cuts for the rich and has proposed additional tax cuts for the nation's biggest corporations. Like Bush, McCain offers no way to pay for these policies, leaving our children to pay the bill.	39	63
The war in Iraq costs taxpayers 10 billion dollars a month and John McCain would stay in Iraq as long as it takes. We could be using that money by investing in the next generation of Americans, rebuilding our schools and roads, exploring alternative energy and creating jobs.	34	60

### Conclusion

This election, of course, is about “change,” not only in the sense that every candidate for office is talking about “change,” but also in the sense that this election could—and arguably for progressives must—change the complexion of the American electorate. Demographically, if the



same electorate shows up in 2008 that showed up in 2004, Democrats could fail to win the White House once again. Victory not only means running competitive among swing voters, but turning out voters who are “base” and driving up their margin. There are a number of groups progressives need to focus on this year, unmarried women (66 percent Democratic in 2006 and 26 percent of the voting age population), people of color (76 percent Democratic in 2006) and, of course, youth (60 percent Democratic in 2006).

Driving up the margin among young voters, at least, means wedding McCain firmly to Bush and holding him accountable for the terrible legacy they have given the next generation of Americans.