

Young Voters in the 2016 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the youngest bloc of voters in the 2016 election. Through primary, and secondary research, this research seeks to understand what was of importance to 18 to 24 year olds during this election cycle. Furthermore, this research examines how campaigns use social media and other methods of communication to reach out to this age bloc.

Young people, particularly this generation of millennials, exist as somewhat of an enigma to the rest of the country. However, as demonstrated in this research, they are not vastly different from young voters who came before. In order to effectively reach this group of voters, campaigns must focus on authenticity, using social media commendably, and bringing change to what they may view as a failed system. Using the insights from this research, campaigns in the future can engage, motivate and empower young voters.

This research will focus in on the youngest group of voters: those between the ages of 18 and 24. This is a subgroup of what is commonly referred to as millennials, which spans a larger section of the electorate. Typically, millennials are considered to be anyone born between 1980 and 2000.¹ Within the categorization of millennial, there exists a wide array of opinions, largely between those on the older end and those on the younger end; one way to divide up this group is based on their age during the 2008 election.² For those that were old enough to vote for then-Senator Obama in 2008, their political views were set in before the 2016 election began, with many being highly loyal to the Democratic Party. Those that were not of voting age in 2008 do not have the same level of loyalty to the Democratic Party and are in general less likely to identify with any political party; they are more willing than their older counterparts to vote for a republican or a third party. Furthermore, younger millennials are highly resistant to party identification, with 35% declaring themselves independent in this election year.³

¹ "Millennials." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, Nov. 20, 2016, accessed

² Jeff Stein, "Clinton's real millennial problem: young Americans are less loyal to Democrats," *Vox*, Sept. 21, 2016, accessed 20 Oct. 20, 2016.

³ "Young voters in the 2016 general election," *The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement*, accessed Jan. 3, 2017.

The older group of millennials is more likely to support economically conservative ideas; while political leanings remain relatively stable over time, young people continue to be increasingly liberal, further separating them from other age blocks of voters.⁴ As described in a report by the Reason Foundation in association with YouGov, millennials are “social liberals and fiscal centrists.”⁵ While millennials as a whole are still more liberal than their Boomer counterparts, the older millennials are closer their views tend to be to the center. In the end, millennials typically end up splitting along about the same lines as the country as a whole. During the 2016 Election, millennial voters became the largest voting block, making their political beliefs and motives all the more important. With this basic understanding of the largest generation, one can now look closer at the younger half of this age group, those between the ages of 18 and 24.

Voters who were between the ages of 18 and 24 for the 2016 Election grew up in a tumultuous time politically. They saw Washington D.C reach partisan peak, with three government shutdowns; they have seen few years without war; they lived through the Great Recession.⁶ In this atmosphere, this age group formed their political views, which are often highly paradoxical.⁷ Based on polling data, millennials support a wide range of policy positions that at times run contrary to one another. While they are the most liberal

⁴ Derek Thompson. “Millennials’ political views don’t make any sense,” *The Atlantic*, July 15, 2014, accessed 24 Oct. 2016.

⁵ “Millennials: The Politically Unclaimed Generation,” *Reason-Rupe Public Opinion Survey* (2014), accessed Jan. 3, 2017, <http://reason.com/assets/db/2014-millennials-report.pdf>

⁶ Dylan Matthews, "Here Is Every Previous Government Shutdown, Why They Happened and How They Ended," *The Washington Post*. WP Company, Sept.25, 2013, accessed Nov. 20, 2016.

⁷ Thompson, “Millennials’ political views don’t make any sense”

generation on certain social issues, including marijuana legalization, gay rights and immigration, 26% describe themselves as conservative.⁸

Compared to their older millennial counterparts, young millennials do not remember the Bush administration with extreme clarity. Any blunders that may have happened under the Bush administration happened before they had any real political involvement.⁹ They developed their political views, a process which typically happens in an individual's late high school years, after the start of the first Obama administration. During this time, younger millennials witnessed promises fall short and gridlock in Washington grind the government to a halt. Due to this environment, young millennials learned that government is often inept at solving important problems facing the country. They entered the world in a time when the economy was collapsing seemingly as a result of the greed from those in power, and the "American Dream" no longer felt attainable.¹⁰ This led to a general distrust of institutions, particularly those in the financial sector; furthermore, growing up during the recession, could have caused this age bloc to support economically liberal policies to encourage equality. As expressed in a piece about the liberal revolution, "...young people don't just feel that they have been uniquely disadvantaged by the economy, but also that they are revolutionaries for urgent social

⁸ CIRCLE, "Young voters in the 2016 general election"

⁹ Jeff Stein, "Clinton's real millennial problem: young Americans are less loyal to Democrats," *Vox*, Sept. 21, 2016, accessed Oct. 20, 2016.

¹⁰ Nate Silver, "Why Young Democrats Love Bernie Sanders," *FiveThirtyEight*, Feb. 8, 2016, accessed Oct. 25, 2016.

rights, particularly for black Americans and gay couples. They sense that they are both America's impoverished generation and its moral guardians.”¹¹

Younger millennials' preference for Bernie Sanders during the primary season demonstrated their willingness to support more liberal candidates and their indifference towards traditional party labels. Both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump could possibly attribute their degree of success with this age group on their eschewal of the major political party apparatuses. Division between older and younger millennials can be seen quite clearly in Iowa Presidential Election results; Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump split 18-29 year-old votes evenly, with both receiving 45% and the remaining 10% going to third party candidates. However, Clinton won those between the ages of 18-24 and Trump won those between the ages of 25-29.¹² Iowa represents a microcosm of how the youth vote is likely to divide itself, with the youngest bloc going more liberal.

Knowing this information about this collection of voters can aid in understanding their voting habits and place in the political system. Political engagement however is not the sole result of the voters feeling motivated to go vote; they have to be informed, motivated and empowered by campaigns to make the decision to actually go to their polling place. In order to get voters to that point, the campaigns must communicate their key messages and find the best mediums to reach these voters.

¹¹Derek Thompson, “The Liberal Millennial Revolution,” *The Atlantic*, Feb. 29, 2016, accessed Oct. 21, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-liberal-millennial-revolution/470826/>

¹²*The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement*. Tufts University and Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, 2010, accessed Oct. 15, 2016, <http://civicyouth.org>.

At any given moment, political campaigns, along with those already elected to office, are making efforts to communicate with their constituents or voters. Methods used to communicate vary depending on the audience and message. Reaching voters through communication efforts has the ultimate goal of getting them to turn out come Election Day. Furthermore, communicating with voters allows for campaigns to inform voters of what they want them to know; campaign communications allows them to tell a specific story that will hopefully convince voters to chose that candidate and excite them enough to act. Campaigns ultimately will want the voters to turn out to vote on election, however in the intermediate time campaigns could want voters to donate money, volunteer, or follow the campaign on social media.

During campaigns, one of the most pervasive methods of connecting with voters is a campaign advertisement. While historically relevant, political ads have become increasingly antiquated, particularly when trying to attract the attention of young voters, advertisements prove ineffective. Due to this, campaigns have been experimenting with other mediums to reach their audiences, like online streaming platforms, and social media advertisements. However, the underlying interest in traditional campaign ads still exist, with voters looking at particular advertisements online. For instance, advertisements from both the Clinton and Sanders' campaigns had over 4 million views each on YouTube.¹³

Along with television advertisements, campaigns also use other supporters or members of the campaign who can be successful surrogates. Surrogates play an important

¹³ Lynn Vavreck, "The Ad that Moved People the Most: Bernie Sanders' 'America,'" *The New York Times*, Dec. 30, 2016, accessed Jan. 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/upshot/the-campaign-ads-that-moved-people-the-most.html?_r=0

role when connecting with voters who would otherwise not relate easily to the actual candidate. Appearing in advertisements, making campaign stops, and talking about the candidate through social media platforms are all ways surrogates can reach out to voters; they can help candidates appeal to voters that they may not be naturally relate to. During the 2016 election, celebrity surrogates tried to influence the opinions of young voters. This tactic is widely employed during the general election when candidates' time is particularly tight. In addition, surrogates have the advantage of being separated from the actual campaign; while it may not be advisable for a candidate to say something snarky or mean about the opposing candidates, surrogates have enough distance from the campaign and enough of their own identity to get out certain messages. The eventual goal of using surrogates is to get voters excited about the candidate, and ultimately voting come election.

Other methods of campaign outreach include emailers, op-eds or letter to the editors published in newspapers, and direct contact with voters through canvassing and phone calling. Of the communications tactics campaigns can employ, peer-peer programs are proven to be among the most effective.¹⁴ Direct contact with voters through canvassing or phone calls helps particularly with young voters to educate on the issues and the logistics behind voting. Since young voters are considered the most unreliable voters, being less likely to actually vote than their older counterparts, communicating messages in this highly specified way can make an immense impact.¹⁵ Furthermore, this

¹⁴ Daniel Shea and Rebecca Harris, "Why Bother? Because Peer-to-Peer Programs Can Mobilize Young Voters," *Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 2 (2006): 341-345.

¹⁵ Elizabeth McKenna and Hahrie, *Groundbreakers: How Obama's 2.2 Million Volunteers Transformed Campaigning in America*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

direct form of contact with voters can also increase their likelihood to engage with politics beyond the mere act of voting.

In addition to some of the more traditional methods of communication, campaigns utilize social media more than ever in the 2016 election to communicate their messages with prospective voters. While this first became a major method of communication starting in 2008 with the Obama campaign, the importance of social media has only grown. Through interacting with voters via social media, candidates can present a more personalized version of their key messages. Social media allows candidates to appear more personable and appeal to voters on a more human level. By looking at all of these methods combined, one can grasp the communication efforts and their ultimate messaging goals beyond just making contact with voters. The two main outlets for social media outreach are Facebook and Twitter; on these main platforms, campaigns can post information about what the candidate is doing in order to reach the people who already follow the candidate. This can help the supporters feel more connected to the candidate and be enthused by the campaign. Social media advertisements can also be used for highly specific targeting that could not happen through television advertising. Campaigns can promote tweets or posts that target specific demographics that are likely to support them.¹⁶

As mentioned, the ultimate goal of communicating with voters is for them to vote in the campaign's favor come Election Day. Civic engagement, from voting to

¹⁶ "Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public," *Pew Research Center*, July 18, 2016, accessed Nov. 25, 2016, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/07/18/candidates-differ-in-their-use-of-social-media-to-connect-with-the-public/>

volunteering relies on three main resources: time, money and civic skills.¹⁷ Voters' involvement in the political process correlates to their bounty of these resources. This means that people who do not vote or get involved with politics is not because they do not care, but rather they may lack the time to actually go, or the civic skills to know where they are supposed to vote. Furthermore, a lack of engagement in politics is caused by unwillingness, an inability or isolation from the process, according to Brady et al. Those that are unwilling to vote are the hardest for campaigns to reach, and convince to actually vote. Those that feel an inability or isolation could still be reached; campaigns can ensure they know the details of voting so they feel that they have the ability to vote and they can work to empower them, so they do not feel isolated. One way voters can feel less isolated from the political process is engaging with a major political party.

An interesting phenomenon in the 2016 election, particularly when looking at the youth vote, was the deviation from traditional party affiliation as youth voters opted for candidates outside of the major political parties. When discussing party affiliation, one must look at whether voters identify with either the Democratic or Republican Party and are willing to express an allegiance to the party; while they may disagree with the party platform on certain issues, party affiliation proves an accurate predictor of for whom someone will vote. As mentioned, younger millennials are less likely to feel a kinship with the Democratic Party. While young people become less likely to identify with a political party, they become less likely to get involved with campaigns and the major parties. A great deal of political involvement comes from interacting with the local party

¹⁷ Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (1995): 271-294, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2082425>

organizing mechanisms; if young voters are not willing to support one party over another, it removes some of the clearest paths to political engagement. Identification and involvement presents interesting trend with younger voters.

Along with this understanding of party affiliation, one must also recognize the historical significance of the youth vote. Why do campaigns feel that it is not necessarily advantageous to invest time in this age bloc? Looking at the history of the youth vote, a clearer picture is painted about campaigns rational, and perhaps why young voters are left feeling isolated from the political system and the two major parties.

The youth vote first became a topic of interest when 18 year olds were given the right to vote in 1971 with the ratification of the 26th Amendment; prior to that, the voting age was 21, a point that became contentious with the escalation of the Vietnam War and the draft, where anyone above the age of 18 could be called to serve their country wherein they had no political voice. Immediately following the passage of the 26th Amendment, turnout among voters between the ages of 18 and 21 reached 52%.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the enthusiasm was short-lived, and young voters quickly became an unreliable group of voters. As mentioned, involvement in politics is a result of having time, money and civic skills; these are resources that young people are likely to lack.¹⁹ However, this is not to say that young people are apathetic; their engagement in protests and other political movements during the 1960s “spearheaded the social revolution that liberalized values across Western countries.”²⁰ Yet young voters continued to have lower turnout than other age blocs (Figure 1). Candidates rarely worked to appeal to this age

¹⁸ Thom File, “Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964-2012,” *U.S. Census Bureau*, April 2014, accessed Oct. 27, 2016.

¹⁹ Brady, et al., 1995

²⁰ “Young people and free speech,” 2017

bloc, viewing them as a low political priority; compared to any other age group, young people showed little motivation to actually vote. Since 1964, the percentage of people under the age 24 who actually voted never reached above 50%, while older voters consistently turned out in high numbers.²¹ In addition, young people would typically split their vote along the same lines as the rest of the country, limiting the impact they had as a group.

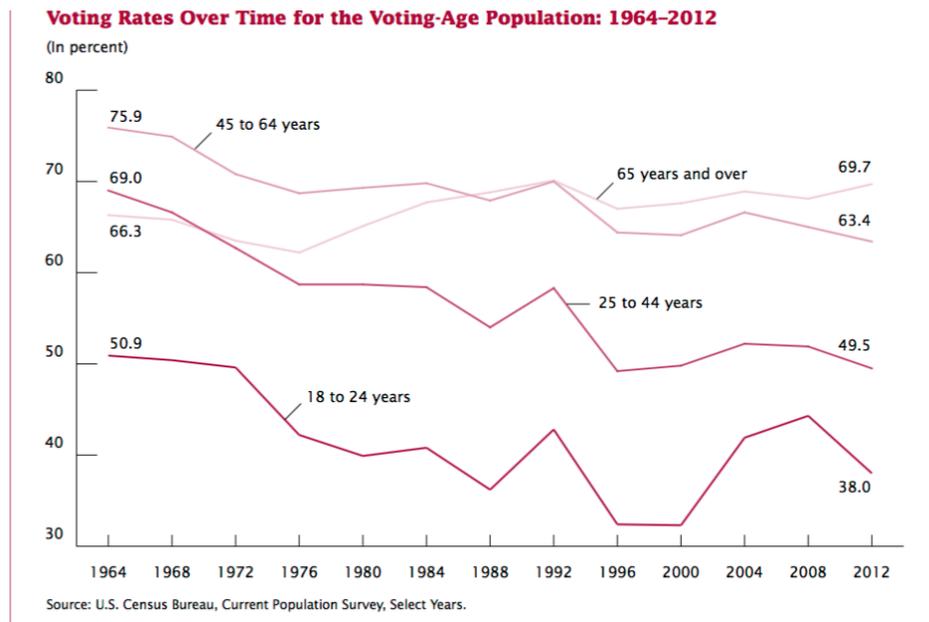


Figure 1²²

In the 1992 presidential election, young voters were briefly rejuvenated and their voting rate increased to 42.8%. After this exciting election, young voters returned to their appearance of apathy; while they continued to turnout, other age blocs proved to be more reliable voters. The spike in turnout during the 1992 election and the subsequent fall could be a result of a variety of factors. Firstly, the Clinton campaign in 1992 excited the youth vote with a relatively young and exciting candidate, who filled them with hopes

²¹ File, 2014

²² Ibid.

and promise. When the Clinton administration failed to meet expectations during their first four years, young voters became less inclined to vote. Another possibility is that young voters were bored by the mundane campaign of 1996, particularly in comparison to the 1992 election. It was not until 2004, when youth turnout once again reached 42%. Despite their increase in turnout during the 2004 election, candidates still neglected their communications towards young voters. While a few candidates worked to court the youth vote during primary season, it was seen to lack impact. Young people were still not believed to have the power to actually change the result of an election. Treating young voters as if they did not have the power to impact an election became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as they were then led to believe that they did not have that power.

One of the first campaigns to make a genuine effort to win over young voters was Howard Dean in the 2004 Democratic Primary. Young people, particularly on college campuses swarmed to the Howard Dean campaign in droves. Known as “Generation Dean,” groups of young people on campuses could form grassroots coalitions in order to mobilize young people in their area. In what could be seen as an early iteration of Twitter, Generation Dean groups would post blogs through the organizing website; they also had the ability to send out mass-emails to other young supporters. Dean was the first candidate to truly utilize the Internet in order to reach out to voters. Through this outreach, Dean managed to become a proto-Sanders figure in regards to small-dollar donations, receiving over 80,000 individual donations from college students. According to student supporters of Dean, he was a “rebel”, taking an anti-war stance and recognition

of gay civil unions when he was governor of Vermont.²³ Even though Dean would go on to lose the Democratic primary to John Kerry, he was able to demonstrate the power behind the youth vote. His campaign provided evidence that young people would get involved if there energized by a candidate.

The energy of the youth vote was finally harnessed to its full effect in 2008, when then-Senator Obama was able to mobilize young people. During the 2008 campaign, young people were energized in a way they hadn't been before. Beyond getting young people to turn out to vote, with close to 50% turning out, the Obama campaign mobilized young people into a force of volunteers. This group put in "long, thankless hours" for the campaign and used their influence among peers to convince others to vote.²⁴ This became the key to success in the Obama campaign; they were able to rely on volunteers to spread the message of the campaign, instead of using more traditional methods of campaign communication, like television advertising. As it has been studied in consumer-facing marketing efforts, word-of-mouth advertising is 80% more effective than traditional advertising.²⁵ This same concept could then be applied to political communications; people respect the views of their peers more than the messages being directed at them by campaigns. By mobilizing young people to volunteer for the campaign, they were able to enjoy the benefits of each individual's social circle. While the young Obama volunteers may not have been able to convince everyone in their lives to vote for then-Senator Obama, they were able to act like ambassadors for the campaign and possibly shift the

²³ Kevin Joy, "Dean Campaign Gains Momentum from College Students, Internet," *Boston University Fall 2003 Newswire*, Oct. 19, 2003, accessed Jan. 2, 2017.

²⁴ McKenna and Hahrie, 2014

²⁵ Kimberly Whitler, "Why Word of Mouth Marketing is the Most Important Social Media," *Fobes*, July 17, 2014, accessed Jan. 3, 2017.

perception of those around them. His army of volunteers became the backbone to the campaign, and would form the foundation for modern political operations going forward.²⁶ These young voters would then make direct contact with other voters, through door knocking, canvassing or phone calling.

Obama's 2008 campaign appealed directly to the heart of young voters; it was a campaign that was fueled by optimism and the idea of helping one's fellow man. With this large generation of voters, Obama's campaign shaped what they could expect from a presidential campaign; they wanted to be inspired and be reminded about what is great in the country. While they craved change, the spirit of the campaign is what drove troves of young people to volunteer. Better than any campaign, the Obama '08 team managed to make an appeal directly to the heart of young voters, an effort that was aided by the optics of a young charismatic candidate. Going forward from past successes with youth voters, the campaigns of 2016 worked to pull on these examples in order to engage this group of voters.

While looking at 18-24 year old voters during the 2016 election, it is important to note the variations that exist. Youth voters are typically discussed in a highly generalized way, as if one hive mind controls the entire group. To further understand individual beliefs and dispositions towards candidates running in both party's primaries, interviews were conducted with young voters from varying backgrounds and political affiliations. The main candidates discussed were Donald Trump, Rick Santorum, Marco Rubio, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Jill Stein and Gary Johnson. Regardless of the

²⁶ Hahrie Han, *Moved to Action: Motivation, Participation & Inequality in American Politics*, Stanford University Press, 2009.

interviewee's political leanings, it became abundantly clear that this group of young voters were not ignorant about the candidates, or the issues that mattered to them. A common misperception of young voters is that they are apathetic about the political system; they may manage to care for a brief while, but rarely engage in politics in any sincere way. This misperception is exacerbated by reports regarding youth turnout. While youth turnout remains the lowest of any age group, millennials now represent the largest demographic group in the country; going forward, their political ideologies will shape American politics and political parties.

During the course of this research, it became vitally important to talk directly with youth voters to inform what is revealed in traditional polling data. Interviews were conducted with a total of 10 voters between the ages of 18 and 24; they were chosen based on varying backgrounds, beliefs and levels of political engagement. Interviews took place either in face-to-face meetings or over the phone over the course of a half hour to an hour. Below are profiles on four individuals interviewed, which are representative of the four main viewpoints that were expressed throughout the interview process.

Lauren, a 20-year-old woman with some college education, found this election cycle as a political awakening. Prior to this election, she did not have any particular interest in politics but hearing what Bernie Sanders was saying, she became far more engaged. He was the only candidate in her estimation that would talk about values above policies. Trusting that his values would dictate what policies he would then pursue, Lauren felt that she could finally trust a politician. Most of her political news and information came from social media, in particular Facebook; her engagement existed so much online that she realized a ways into the primaries, that she had never actually heard

what Sanders' voice sounded like. Despite her narrow knowledge of the candidate, Lauren felt that she could trust him; there was an authenticity to which she was drawn, while the other candidates represented everything that had failed the country up to this point.

Progressive taxation, workers' rights and raising the minimum wage became the most important issues to Lauren over the course of the election. Going into the election, she was most interested in prison reform and other issues that were not being discussed by any candidates in the field. Through the course of the campaign, she rarely sought out news, but would read the occasional article that popped up on her newsfeed. This could possibly result in her casual misunderstanding of certain stories that arose during the campaign. For instance, she conflated stories about Hillary Clinton's email server with WikiLeaks releasing campaign chairman John Podesta's emails. Misinterpreting information, like in this case, demonstrates the Clinton campaign's limited ability to communicate effectively with voters over Facebook. This also demonstrates the dangers of reading news over social media; Lauren received tidbits of news stories without looking into them further.

As a 21-year-old woman, Rachel holds strong opinions about politics, but recognizes her ignorance on certain subjects. Growing up as a non-citizen, she never expected to have the opportunity to vote; three years ago, she gained citizenship and felt incredibly excited to have the opportunity to vote. While growing up in an immigrant family with a disabled sibling, Rachel was always interested in politics and saw the myriad of ways what the government does, or does not do, directly impacts the lives of real people. She spent time during high school in Wisconsin, volunteering for political

campaigns. Her time in school represented a particularly tumultuous time in Wisconsin politics, with an attempted recall of the governor and she felt the overwhelming need to get involved. The community of people in which she surrounded herself also influenced her political views; during this time, her friends and family were highly politically involved. Since going off to college in Florida, Rachel finds it increasingly difficult to engage with politics in any sincere way, outside of voting. At her school, she finds it difficult to be politically active. While she spends much of her day discussing politics with cohorts in her program, the engagement is nowhere close to her past involvement. Furthermore, a problem that faces most college students, her busy schedule makes it difficult to research what is going on in her district.

For Rachel, arts funding, women's health, stem cell research and environmental issues are the deciding factors behind her vote; these are all issues that have had direct impact on her life and her future. In her estimation, the Democratic Party is the only party that is talking about what she cares about. However, she finds the rhetoric regarding gun control coming out from Democrats troubling at times. Growing up in a pro-gun household, Rachel disagrees with the direction the Democratic Party is heading on gun control. Rarely does she look into economic policy or will an economic policy discussion truly resonate with her. She finds most of her political news on social media, looking at her Twitter feed, where she follows mostly news sources, at least once a day. From the headlines she sees on social, she will read a full article about 5 times a week. She is mostly likely to click on articles from sources she trusts, like *The New York Times*, Politico, CNN and the Associated Press; if she is interested in further analysis and commentary, she will turn to *The New Yorker*. Recognizing that her social media is

largely sources repeating back that which she already believes Rachel makes a concerted effort to follow those with whom she disagrees. The effort to unskew her feed becomes difficult at times since she does not want to be forced to look at sources she finds untruthful or upsetting in her free time.

Anthony, a 24-year-old graduate student, considers himself moderately politically. While he doesn't identify with any particular political party, he considers himself on the conservative end of the spectrum. Living in the state of Texas, he does not believe that his vote will affect the outcome of the state's election, but continues to vote in federal, state and local elections. That being said, he is a registered Republican to ensure he would be able to vote in the party's primary; he assumed that whoever would win the Republican primary would win the general in Texas. Prior to his time in graduate school, he worked for public offices as well as statewide anti-hunger advocacy groups. Due to his work in the political realm, he reads news nearly every day, getting both *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* delivered to his house daily. Beyond traditional news outlets, he listens to a wide range of political podcasts. He used social media to follow what others were saying about major news events, like during the conventions and debates.

In response to the most important issue during the campaign, Anthony responded sardonically that it was "avoiding a nuclear holocaust at the hands of Trump." Beyond the fatalism he felt about Trump, he cares most strongly about having a safety net for individuals who fall on hard times, international trade embracing globalization. Anthony has been continually troubled by both major parties moving further away from free trade and globalization, something of which he is a big supporter. His ongoing hope was

whoever would win the election to bridge the partisan divide that expanded over the course of the Obama administration.

As an avid Republican, Natalie has been highly engaged in politics for quite some time. Starting in high school, the now 22-year-old volunteered on for several candidates. She views herself as a “block republican”, willing to vote “big R down the ticket” regardless of the candidate being presented. She prefers candidates who will stick to party doctrine, and not work across party lines for the purpose of accomplishing something, because it causes the candidates to abandon what they may consider to be the “right thing” in an effort to win political points. She watches *Fox News* nearly everyday, but will try to look at other television news sources if there is a particularly big story going on. She will also read *Wall Street Journal*, Breitbart, Campus Reform, and College Fix. Natalie recognizes the narrowness of her sources, but does not want to spend her time looking at sources she disagrees with, much like other interviewees.

Being pro-life is the most important issue for Natalie when looking at the candidates in the Republican field. Beyond the issue of abortion, she is interested in immigration, national security and a populist message; she does note however that she will support whatever is on the Republican Party platform. This means that this year, she adjusted her opinions on free trade, as the Republican Party moved away from supporting free trade agreements. In general, she hopes that the Republican Party will turn their focus to issues where there is still a fight, like gun-owners’ rights, free speech, and religious liberties.

For this age group, social issues, like marriage equality and drug sentencing reform, were typically the deciding factors when identifying with one political party over

another.²⁷ While social issues are still vitally important to this age group, their relevance in party identification has become less prominent. Social changes throughout the country have caused the two parties to move closer together on certain issues that were once the deciding factors for young voters. To wit, they became less likely to identify with one party over another because in their mind, it was two sides of the same coin. Both parties represented dysfunction in the capital and were funded by large dollar donors that could control in some fashion how representatives voted. Historically, the Democratic Party has managed to be successful with this age group thanks to an “out of touch” Republican platform.²⁸ However, the 2016 election presented a transformation of these typically held views.

According to Harvard’s IOP survey, five key issues were most important to millennials as a whole in this election: growing the economy, reducing terrorism, addressing inequality, uniting Americans, and reducing big money in politics.²⁹ Going forward, it is important to note which candidates mentioned these key issues and how that correlates to youth voter support. The issues raised by IOP seem to directly predict where youth support will fall in the 2016 election. Out of these five key issues, it is important to note that the traditional “social issues” associated with young voters are not mentioned. Since young people have reached a general consensus on issues like marriage equality, which over 70% of 18-21 year olds support, and gender equality, which over 90% of 18-

²⁷ “Millennial Report,” *Harvard IOP*, The President and Fellows at Harvard College, 2016, accessed 13 Oct. 2016.

²⁸ “Millennial Report,” 2016

²⁹ “Millennial Agenda for the Next President,” *Harvard IOP*. The President and Fellows at Harvard College, July 2016, accessed 13 Oct. 2016.

21 year olds support.³⁰ Democrats have built a platform and youth outreach program around these social issues, which are no longer the main issues for young people. As mentioned in an interview with Natalie, an avid Republican and Trump supporter, “We should just be inclusive,” and move on from talking about same-sex marriage. The evolution on these ideas demonstrates how separated the traditional Republican Party was from the young people that were going to shape the party going forward. “Establishment Republicans” spend much of the Obama administration digging in their heels on issues that were no longer important to their young constituents.

While young people’s views on traditionally conservative or liberal social issues have evolved, like young Republicans moving away from traditionally conservative ideas on gay marriage, their opinions about the political system as a whole have changed drastically. Young voters today grew up in a time when political dysfunction reached a peak. According to *The Economist*’s article endorsing Hillary Clinton, “A quarter of Americans born since 1980 believe that democracy is a bad form of government.”³¹ Young people are less likely than other age blocs to identify with a political party; they have watched the two major parties divide the country and bring the government to a halt on multiple occasions. According to Lauren, who does not identify with either party, the two major parties exist to maintain the status quo. To her, the perception that the Democratic Party is there to help minorities and working people is entirely false. Democrats hardly even differ from Republicans. Anthony expressed a similar distaste for

³⁰ “Young people and free speech,” *The Economist*, Feb. 15, 2017, accessed Feb. 15, 2017 <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2017/02/daily-chart-10>

³¹ “America’s best hope,” *The Economist*, Nov. 5, 2016, accessed Nov. 6, 2016 <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21709540-why-we-would-cast-our-hypothetical-vote-hillary-clinton-americas-best-hope>

the two-party system, but for different reasons. He viewed party identification as an easy-way out, allowing voters to “fall into red team/blue team so they do not have to actually think their way through complex policy decisions.” There is evidence to suggest that this overwhelming pessimism about the political system and the two parties in charge led to the rise of two “anti-establishment” candidates on both sides of the aisle.

In addition to young people changing views of the political system, the way in which they consume news. Compared to voters of any other age group, young people drastically rely on non-traditional media sources. While voters over the age of 30 look to Cable TV news more than other sources, those between the ages of 18 and 29 used social media more than any other medium to learn about what was going on in the political realm.³² Consuming news in this manner allows for voters to get their news from others already in their social networks. They can see what their friends find interesting and engage online about whatever is going on. In theory, this could increase engagement with political news and allow consumers of media to fit the news into their busy schedules. Making political news more accessible can make the political process less intimidating and encourage more citizens to get involved.³³ Since consuming news makes people more likely to vote, it is possible that social media could increase turnout by provide more news sources.³⁴ Furthermore, it allows voters to have a dialogue about politics,

³² Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel, Elisa Shearer and Amy Mitchel, “The 2016 Presidential Campaign – a News Event That’s Hard to Miss,” *Pew Research Center*, Feb. 4, 2016, accessed Jan. 3, 2017 <http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/04/the-2016-presidential-campaign-a-news-event-thats-hard-to-miss/>

³³ Kevin Curry, “More and more people get their news via social media. Is that good or bad,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 30, 2016, accessed Oct. 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/30/more-and-more-people-get-their-news-via-social-media-is-that-good-or-bad/?utm_term=.cf81c2b3b758

³⁴ Curry, 2016

which may not have been addressed in personally interactions. Social media also accounts for nearly half the traffic news organizations see online.³⁵ Digital news has given magazines and newspapers larger audiences than they have seen in years, assisting an industry that has been struggling in recent years.

However, using social media to find political news separates traditional media outlets from the consumers. Finding news on social media increases the risk of disreputable gaining traction. While traditional news sources that operate with certain levels of journalistic integrity continue to vet sources to ensure their credibility, online sources are not often held to that same creed. In one sitting, a voter could see an article posted on Facebook by their friend from Daily Kos, an article from Brietbart, posted by a relative, and a tweet from *The New York Times*. At some point in time, these sources all conflate, and it becomes difficult for the reader to remember which headline was from party propaganda sites and what was from the country's foremost paper. As mentioned by a participant in a study conducted by *Columbia Journalism Review*, "It's not that the reputation of the publication did not affect my opinion . . . but more that I didn't pay attention to it at all." Information comes to the consumer at a speed that does not allow for it to be properly processed. To wit, falsities breathe new life on social media, and can spread faster than a fact-checked article from a reputable source.

In order to effectively reach out to this demographic, all the campaigns dedicated a great deal of time and energy to a social media strategy. Candidates could use social media to talk directly with their constituents; it allows the campaigns to circumvent the

³⁵ Danny Funt, Chava Gourarie, and Jack Murtha, "The New Yorker, BuzzFeed and the push for digital credibility," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 27, 2016, accessed Jan. 3, 2017, http://www.cjr.org/special_report/newyorker_buzzfeed_trust.php?curator=MediaREDEF

media and get their story out the people directly. Through this relatively new media, campaigns drastically changed how they communicate and it allowed them to meet young people where they already were. However, social media has the ability to become an echo chamber.

As discussed by Rachel, she only really follows sources and candidates she supports. Therefore, when the Clinton campaign put out a video through social media, or Sanders posted something about a policy idea, Rachel would see that and garner more affinity for the candidate. Meanwhile, she did not follow and at times actively avoided news about Trump and other republican candidates. Seeing the candidates' views on social media can also make voters feel less inclined to seek out and read other news sources. Furthermore, while campaigns became adept at engaging voters on social media, they lacked oftentimes lacked the ability to turn that online engagement into in-person volunteering. When asked about campaign engagement, those interviewed often responded that they would post on social media about the candidate of their choice, rarely would they get out to volunteer in person, as people their age did in Obama's 2008 campaign.

On Election Day, all that has been discussed culminated into the final results, which revealed information on these voters. Upon viewing the results of the election, one must observe which campaign won this age demographic, but also finding their shortcomings. What can be learned from campaign failures in this election?

Hillary Clinton won the majority of youth voters between the ages of 18 and 24 (Figure 2).³⁶ She won 56%, with 35% going to Donald Trump, leaving 9% of the vote going to third-party candidates; this is in comparison to 4% going to third parties in 2012 and 2% in 2008. The lackluster enthusiasm among this age group is recognizable. Referring back to the five key issues important to millennials as identified by IOP (growing the economy, reducing terrorism, addressing inequality, uniting Americans and reducing big money in politics), the Clinton campaign tried to reach voters on these particular issues. They addressed growing the economy, addressing inequality, and uniting Americans. However, the vessel the messages came through was flawed. While many voters were excited to be able to vote for Hillary Clinton, others viewed her as an empty pantsuit.³⁷ While the Clinton campaign was talking about issues young voters claimed they cared about, like prison reform for interviewee Lauren, the messages didn't break through. The polished social media efforts that impressed her fans, like Rachel, did little to convince others to find the candidate compelling. The Clinton campaign could provide a pragmatic solution on nearly every issue of importance for a young voter; the campaign site was littered with policy plans, but if young people did not see Hillary Clinton as someone who could instigate change, they would not support her.

³⁶ Avik Roy, "A Big Part of Hillary Clinton's Defeat: She Alienated Millennial Voters," *Forbes*, November 9, 2016, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/aviksaroy/2016/11/09/a-big-part-of-hillarys-defeat-she-alienated-millennial-voters/#2827fba3347a>

³⁷ "First-Time Voters," *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2016, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/31/first-time-voters>

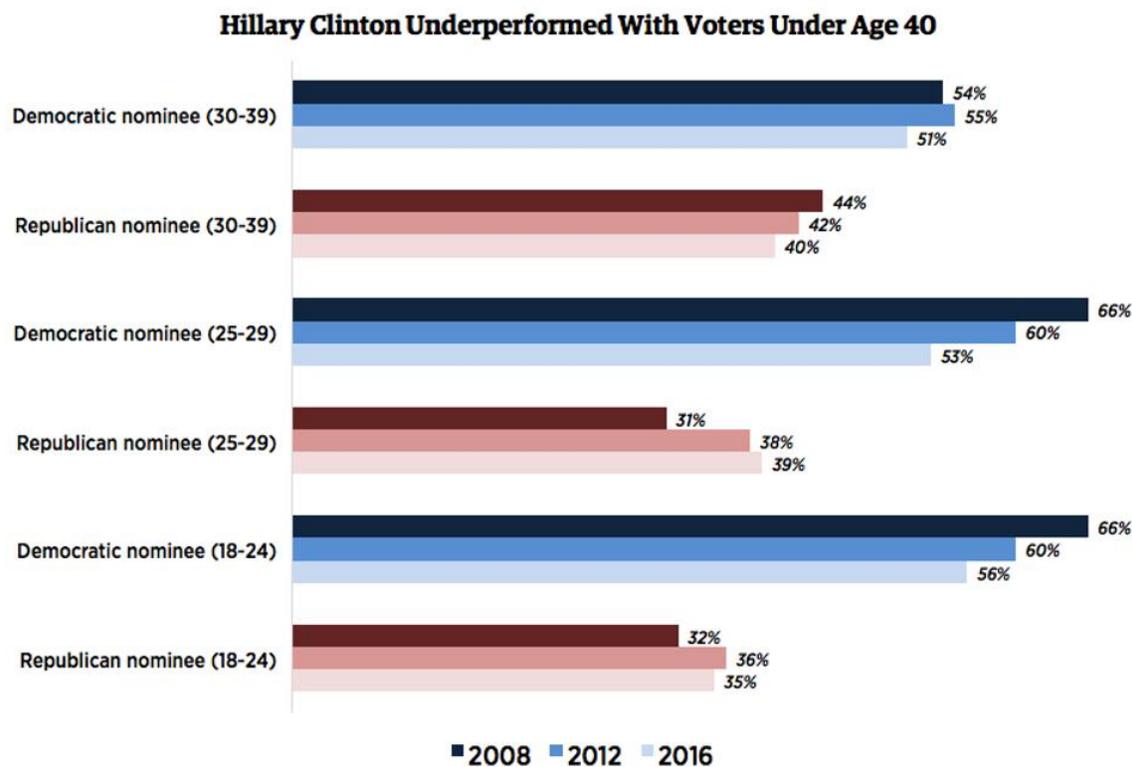


Figure 2

As for Donald Trump, he proved about as successful with this age bloc as past Republican candidates; similar to his overall base, young voters that chose candidate-Trump were mainly white.³⁸ Furthermore, voters saw him as a liability, but they were willing to take the risk, because they believed he would be able to bring change.³⁹ They saw the flaws but were interested nevertheless. Unlike interviewee Natalie, young people did not support the Trump campaign out of party loyalty, but rather because they were attracted to his brazen and authentic appeal. This is not unlike the Bernie Sanders appeal during the Democratic Primaries. His approach to social media was unpolished, and

³⁸ Polly Mosendz, "What This Election Taught Us About Millennial Voters," *Bloomberg*, Nov. 9, 2016, accessed Nov. 23, 2016.

³⁹ Patrick Healy and Dalia Sussman, "Voters' View of a Donald Trump Presidency: Big Risks and Rewards," *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2016, accessed Oct. 24, 2016.

reinforced his image, whereas the Clinton campaign's social media demonstrated efforts to reach all voters. While this could seem like a good method to convince voters, social media has not yet proven to have that ability. Social media was used in this election to reinforce ideas, whether they are ideas about a candidate, or ideas about what should be in the news.

From this research, there are three key takeaways from this election cycle in relation to young voters: authenticity is vital to survival, social media is a powerful tool but may not have the same effect as in-person voter contact, and young people desire tangible change. Looking at the candidates and campaigns young people gravitated to, it is clear that "politics as usual" is not a viable option. They want people in office who will not only represent them effectively, but also be true to ideals. Standing behind a political party is not nearly as important as standing behind what the candidate stands for. Ideally, what the candidates stand for will support change in the system that has let young voters down repeatedly throughout their lifetime. Furthermore, this means that promoting a policy platform may not be as relevant to this group; they are more interested in the intention behind the ideas than the ideas themselves. Focusing on the ability to change the system also works to empower these young voters, making them more likely to turnout to vote and engage with campaigns.

As for social media, the methods used in 2008 to great effect cannot directly translate to the young people of today. For those that spend a great deal of their time online, social media is a place to have conversations. If campaigns are not communicating via social in a way that feels genuine, the messages are moot. Furthermore, social media can be highly effective in reaching supporters and

communicating one side of a story, it has not been proven to change minds. Social media is most effective as a motivation tactic, however face-to-face contact with voters remains the clearest way to reach all voters, even the ever-allusive youth voter.

While the 2016 election agitated traditional conventions of presidential politics, much of what transpired was a result of trends that began several cycles ago. This is the case with young voters between the ages of 18 and 24. Young voters continued to turnout to vote, and continued the trend of gravitating towards liberal candidates. Their distaste for the establishment became evident during the primaries, as they supported overwhelmingly Bernie Sanders who does not identify with either political party. This is underlined by the results of the election, where young voters supported the democratic candidate, but significantly less than they did in past elections. Despite campaigns' best efforts, they struggled to reach past levels of engagement. Looking at the three key takeaways, in order for a campaign to be successful with this age group, they must first be authentic. Going forward, these 18 to 24 year olds will shape the state of local and national politics. With these insights in mind, future campaigns can engage with, motivate and empower those who are frequently neglected from the political system.

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