Young African American Voters: A Survey of Students in a HBCU

During the 2004 Presidential Election

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Young African American Voters: A Survey of Students in a Historically Black University (HBCU) in the 2004 Presidential Election

Masoomeh (Dokhi) Khosrovani & Eui Bun Lee

Abstract

During the 2004 Presidential Election, different organizations, religious institutions, and rich and famous people made a great deal of efforts to motivate and encourage young voters to go to the polls and cast their ballots. A sample of 471 students from a historically black university (HBCU) participated in this study. On political participation through voting, 88% of the youth planned to vote in Presidential Election November, 2004. More than half of the respondents said they were affiliated with a political party or identified themselves with one. Majority (78%) of the participants said, they will vote for the Democratic Party candidate. The Democratic Party received higher job approval in the area of education, healthcare, economy, social issues, and foreign policy, compared to the Republican Party on the same issues.

Key words: African American youth & 2004 election; political parties; presidential election; voting
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During the 2004 Presidential Election

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Background of the study

During the 2004 Presidential Election, different organizations, religious institutions, and rich and famous people made a great deal of effort to motivate and encourage young voters to go to the polls and cast their ballots. Both Democratic and Republican parties spent significant amount of money to gather more votes from the pool of young voters.

“Republicans are spending about $10 million through college groups, directed at registration and turnout. They have enlisted 30,000 volunteers at campuses”. On the other side, Democrats have relied more on independent groups for help like the “Americans Coming Together”, one of 527 such committees. These groups focus mostly on swing states to sign up young voters, then follow up to make sure they will show up on the Election Day. (*The New York Times*, September 15, 2004, pp. A1 & A25).

Young people working as foot soldiers go door to door and approach people in public places. They encourage students in academic institutions, call people over the phone or leave recorded messages, and send direct mail or E-mail in order to enlist them to vote.

African American artists, entrepreneurs, journalists, publishers and community activists have all synchronized and harmonized their efforts in the 2004 election to educate, energize, and mobilize eligible young voters. The “Vote or Die” slogan initiated by the famous hip-hop entrepreneur Sean Combs (P. Diddy) and other hip-hop political activists appeared on many T-shirts worn by the youth to show the importance of their
engagement in the voting process. Evidently, such efforts have paid off, because a record number of youth voters turned out in the polling booths. Nearly 21 million Americans under age 30 cast their votes in November 2004, an increase of 4.6 million from the 2000 presidential election, according to a Black Enterprise report (Feb. 2005, p. 40).

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, participation of youth in voting, ages 18-24, increased tremendously on Election Day 2004. This increase was higher than that for any other age group. By far, the voters under age 25 increased from 36% to 47%, from 2000 to 2004 (http://www.civiyout.org). Youth between the ages of 18 to 24 can make a difference in a presidential election, since they amount to more than 1 in every 8 eligible voters (American Demographics, March 1, 2004).

One opinion is that African American voters can play a crucial role in the direction of an election. Historically, they have been influential in helping a political party to win in a close race. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. believed that “black voters were key to propelling Sen. John F. Kennedy to the White House in 1960”, according to a transcript left by him (USA Today, November 2004, p. 7).

Studies on youth voters, conducted at 12 college campuses throughout the country regarding youth voting indicated that the Democratic candidate has received a “20 percentages point lead” over the Republican candidate, in nine colleges (Government Custom Wire, November 2004).

In the presidential election of 2004, 89% of the black votes went to the Democratic candidate (Time, November 15, 2004, p. 41). Therefore, more young blacks voted for the Democratic candidate. African American voters and Hispanic voters more likely identify
themselves as democrats; 90% of blacks and 67% of Hispanic voted Gore in the 2000 presidential election (The American Prospect, Oct 2003, p. A3). Nonetheless, many young people are less likely to identify themselves with either political party; almost 47 percent of voters below age 30 consider themselves independent, said Ann Greenberg in the report. Although more youth voted for the democratic candidate in 2004 presidential election, this does not necessarily mean that they identify with Democratic Party. There is still a lack of partisanship among young adults. Moreover, 22% of the black youth aged 18-25 typify themselves as independent (Black Enterprise, February 2005, p. 41).

Studies have shown that, in general, young people think political parties ignore them and do not pay attention to their needs. However, one study indicates that youth has developed a more positive attitude towards the government after the September 11. In addition, the young generation is not loyal to either party. Therefore, both parties can capitalize on these facts to attract this age group. The youth is serious about voting and pays attention to a candidate who stands on the issue, is experienced, and has a good record of service (State Legislatures, Oct – Nov. 2002, p. 28).

Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2005) investigated the “role of the news media in facilitating issue voting.” The results indicated that participants, who paid more attention to election news coverage by the media, were more likely to have a dauntless opinion on campaign issues. Also, they had more knowledge of where the candidates stood on different topic of discussion. According to another study by S. L. Roberts (2001), news media coverage, specifically that of television, has been the major source of information in presidential elections.
Since 1996, the Internet has been used as a channel for political campaigns and a means to facilitate political information to the public. Almost all-political candidates have established their own web site, providing information to the public (Ku, 2003). In this era of technology, the role of the Internet in providing campaign news regarding the presidential election has absolutely become apparent. Approximately, 60% of African American and Hispanic American households and 75% of the Asian American population are connected to the web. The Internet is regarded as the best means for reaching voters with less cost compared to expensive TV ads, or time and money consuming mail, or door-to-door campaign, according to Lovel and Mack (Adweek, October 2004, p. 10). Another advantage of the Internet is to provide round-the-clock news to the users. Also, voters can download registration forms from the Internet.

What were the major issues concerning young African Americans that energized them and sent them to the polls? As the executive director of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation has stated, the youth were concerned about the issues that affected their lives. The three most important issues of their concern were “economic opportunities, foreign policy, and healthcare/HIV-AIDS”. Another important matter on their mind is the war in Iraq (Black Enterprise, Feb 2005, p. 40). However, for the youth in general, increasing the college tuition fees, has been the most important issue, followed by the Iraq war, and terrorism (The New York Times, September 15, 2004, p. A25).

**Purpose of the study**

This study examines the perceptions of students in a historically black university (HBCU), delving into:

1. The type of media they used to get their news on the Presidential Election of 2004.
2. Political participation through voting.

3. The political party they identified with, their evaluation of each party, and African-American issues handled by the two parties.

4. Major issues of their concern.

5. What do they think about the war in Iraq?

6. Their opinion regarding citizen’s role of participation in a democratic society.

Methodology

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 471 students at a historically black university (HBCU). Information for this research has come from a questionnaire consisting of 29 questions, distributed to the students. This pre-election survey was conducted in the month of October 2004.

Measures for Survey Questionnaire

The first section of the survey included questions regarding the demographic information about the participants such as age, gender, ethnic background, employment and citizenship status. It also included items on the voter registration status, political party membership, and on the intention of participation in the upcoming presidential election.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the respondent’s viewing habits regarding the presidential election news and information. Media choices included traditional sources such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and newer media such as the Internet.
In order to get a valuable insight into the major policy issues and major political parties, students’ opinions were evaluated on education, healthcare, economy, social issues, and foreign policy. Also, participants expressed their opinion regarding the political parties given attention to the issues related to the African Americans.

On the personal level, the students were asked to select from the following issues the one that worried them the most: Jobs going overseas, higher gas prices, increase in the cost of living, increase in the tuition fees, not having an affordable healthcare, the situation in Iraq, and terrorism. Also they were asked to express their opinion toward the war in Iraq.

Finally, the questionnaire polled opinions on citizen’s role as far as responsibility and importance to vote, and the consequences of not exercising one’s right to vote in a democratic society.

**Research Findings**

**Demographics**

About 91% of the respondents were between the ages 18-29. There were more female than male respondents, 55% compared to 45%. Freshman/sophomore participants constituted 72%, and junior/senior 26% of the respondents.

1. **Media Usage**

The data indicates that 31% of the respondents watched the news daily during the presidential election period. Those who watched the news once or twice a week represented 47% of the population. The remaining 11% never viewed the news, and 11% did not respond to this question.

Television was the respondent’s main source of news regarding the presidential
election; newspapers came next; word of mouth was almost even with the Internet; and the Internet gained ground over the radio.

Previous research suggested that the Internet has become a valuable source supplementing traditional media since the Presidential Election of 1996. However, for our sample of college students, the Internet has not played a greater role as a source for campaign issues and the candidates. These students more relied on the traditional network television as well as cable networks for various policy issues.

During the 2004 presidential election, more respondents seemed to favor ABC over other networks in getting their news. FOX was the next watched news source, followed by CNN. Likewise, NBC gained more viewers than CBS; and not many youth watched WB or Public Television news programs based on the results of this study.

2. Political Participation through Voting

Almost 88 percent of the participants planned to vote in the presidential election. Out of those, 81 percent were registered to vote. Those who abstained from voting did so mainly because they believed that their vote would not make a difference in the results of the election. Some thought they did not know enough about the presidential candidates; and some felt that the candidates would not fulfil their campaign promises.

Those who were not registered to vote claimed that they did not know how and where to register. Some stated that they did not have enough time. Others mentioned personal excuses for not registering to vote.

3. Political Party Membership, Evaluation of parties, and African American Issues

More than half of the participants (54 %) claimed that they belong to a political party or identified themselves with one. However, 44% stated they do not belong to any
of the political parties, and 2% did not answer this question. Out of the 54 percent majority, 93 percent attested their affiliation with the Democratic Party, and the remain equally divided between Republican and the Independent party.

From those respondents who claimed they do not belong to a political party (44%), more than one third (38%) wanted to keep their options open to vote as they choose. This indicates the emergence of a greater number of young African American voters who seek independent political affiliation. Another portion (35%) stated that they do not know enough about the political parties or their ideologies. Some had other reasons for not joining a political party (11%), and some did not give a reason (16%).

When asked, “If you decide to vote in the upcoming presidential election, what political party would you vote for?” the majority of the population under the study (78%) stated that they would vote for Democrats, 7% for Republicans and 5% for an Independent candidate, and 10% did not respond to the question.

**Table 1. If you vote in the upcoming presidential election, which political party would you vote for?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Democratic Party</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Republican Party</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Independent party</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total answers</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents</strong></td>
<td><strong>471</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For polling opinions on a variety of issues, respondents were asked to evaluate each political party in handling the following: education, healthcare, economy, social matters, and foreign policy.

**Evaluation results pertaining to the Democratic Party:**

Nearly 90% of the population in the study assessed this party. Their evaluation is as follow:

**On Education:** 50% believed that the democrats handled the education well. 42% had the opinion that the task was done fairly well and only 8% thought the party did a bad job.

**On Healthcare:** 44% were convinced that democrats did well; 46% fairly well, 10% bad job.

**On Economy:** 40% ranked this party well in this area, 47% fairly well and 13% bad.

**On Social issues:** 41% thought they had done well, 48% fairly well and 11% a bad job.

**On Foreign policy:** 36% of the participant’s response was “well” to the Democratic Party’s handling of the job. 48% answered “fairly well” and 16% thought they had badly record in managing foreign policy.

**Table 2. Evaluation of the Democratic Party on the following issues (N=471):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major issues</th>
<th>Well N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Fairly Well N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Bad N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No Answer N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Education</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Healthcare</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Economy</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Social Issues</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Foreign Policy</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation of the Republican Party:

The percentage of respondents evaluating this party on the same list of issues was 86%.

**Education:** 19% believed that Republicans have done well, 43% ranked them fairly well, and 38% concluded that they have done badly in this domain.

**Health care:** The Republican Party received a 12 percent “well” mark from the participants and 33 percent believed that they did “fairly well”. On the other hand, 55 percent ranked their efforts as having “bad” results.

**Economy:** 65 percent were convinced that the Republicans handled the economy badly. However, 25 percent thought the handling was done fairly well, and only 10 percent gave them a well-done job approval.

**Social issues:** 10 percent of the population under this study favored a “well” rating on this subject. About 53 percent chose “bad” as an answer and 37 percent ranked them as “fairly well.”

**Foreign policy:** 62% of the respondents showed discontent with foreign policy management, giving it a “bad” marking. Almost a quarter of the respondents (26%) felt it was fairly well handled and 12% well done.
Table 3. Evaluation of the Republican Party on the following issues (N=471):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major issues</th>
<th>Well N</th>
<th>Well %</th>
<th>Fairly Well N</th>
<th>Fairly Well %</th>
<th>Bad N</th>
<th>Bad %</th>
<th>No Answer N</th>
<th>No Answer %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Education</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Healthcare</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Economy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Social Issues</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Foreign Policy</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is in the interest of a party to seek the growing number of young voters who can help it to win, the survey showed that all three existing political parties approached only 29 percent of the participants. The Democratic Party seems to have taken more steps to reach the youth than the other parties.

Political Parties and African American Issues

Over 70% of the participants thought that the Democratic Party paid more attention to the issue related to African Americans. Close to 16% believed none of the parties had done anything to address issues concerning the African Americans. The Republican Party received 3% approval whereas the Independent Party received 2% and remaining respondents left this question blank, 8%. 
Table 4. In your opinion, which political party pays more attention to the issues related to the African Americans?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Democratic Party</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Republican Party</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Independent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. None of the above</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total answers</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total respondents</strong></td>
<td><strong>471</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Major Issues Concerning the Youth**

Education faces an upheaval increase in cost each academic year. The highest concern expressed by the youth was the burgeoning tuition fees. The situation in Iraq was another issue of their concern, followed by terrorism. Increase in cost of living and not having affordable healthcare were equally worrisome issues to our youth.

5. **War in Iraq**

A greater number of respondents, amounting to 83%, did not agree with the war in Iraq whereas 12% approved of it and 5% of students did not respond to the question.
Reasons given for disagreement on the war in Iraq

Followings are the major categories on the youth disagreement with the war in Iraq:

Lost lives - our troops and others - received the highest disapproval of the war.

No one wins the war; it is not our business to be there; people of that country must decide on their government; war is bad for our economy; there was no WMD; we can not force democracy on other people; no real reason to go to this war. Some students were against the war since they have a member of their family serving in Iraq.

When asked, “in your opinion what are the most important issues that must be taken into consideration, and dealt with by any administration in power?” The student’s responses were as follow: Healthcare; education (emphasis on the cost of tuition fees), economy (jobs, gas prices...); attention to social issues (helping the poor; fair criminal justice, fairness, equality, human rights, morals...); keeping the country safe; foreign policy; ending the war; and the environment.

6. Students’ opinion toward citizen’s role in a democratic society

On the question of whether a citizen’s responsibly is to vote, 94% of the participants agreed. Regarding the importance of voting, by all the citizens, the majority or 95% thought it was important. By far, a great number of these respondents indicated that not participating in the political process through the right to vote would cause democracy to fade away. As a result, some other form of unwanted government would emerge, replacing our democracy.

Conclusions

The findings derived from this survey lead to the following conclusions:
Almost one third of the participants watched the presidential election news every day. Less than one half watched the news once or twice a week. One 10\textsuperscript{th} of the population did not care enough to watch it. More students relied on the medium of television to obtain news coverage of the presidential election. Still, newspapers were considered a major source of information. Internet and word-of-mouth were equal in respondent’s choice of the news source. Radio news came at the bottom.

The majority of students surveyed indicated that they had planned to participate in the election of the president. Most of them said they did register to vote.

The survey revealed that the number of students in the group belonging to a political party exceeded 50%. Less than 50% were not linked to any of the parties, tenacious in keeping their options open, or stating other reasons for not participating. Of the group associated with a political party, 93% leaned or claimed allegiance to the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, majority 78% of the population in this study said they will vote for the Democratic candidate, including those who did not identified with any party.

Political parties job evaluation; in all domains, education, health care, economy, social issues, and foreign affairs, Democrats received high acceptance, where as, Republicans attained less.

Participants thought the job of any administration in power is to care for the welfare of the citizens, provide affordable health care, improve education, lower the college tuition fees, create jobs, keep the economy strong, lower the cost of living, keep the country safe, and solve other social issues.
Students have shown more concern about rising tuition fees than other issues. They also strongly objected to the war in Iraq, giving different reasons for their disapproval. The major reasons cited were lost innocent lives, whether our troops or other people; the responsibility of the people of Iraq to choose their own type of government; the belief that we have no business to be there; and that war is bad for our economy, etc.

On the “responsibilities of the administration in power” issue, students emphasized the priority of healthcare, education -specifically lower college tuition fees, economy- jobs- lower gas prices, attention to the social issues, such as poverty- fair criminal justice for all, and some other issues.

On the issues related to African-Americans, majority of the students in this survey were convinced that the Democratic Party has paid more attention to their causes than other existing parties.

The majority of participants in the survey indicated that they had planned to participate in the election of the president. Over 80% of them said they were registered to vote. A large number of the respondents were certain that in a democracy, citizens have the obligation to vote. They also concurred that by their active participation they can keep democracy well and alive.

Future research should examine the reasons for growing number of young African-American independent voters, and how the existing political parties can attract such a large number of voters. The increasing use of online media by the youth, and its role on African-American youth political participation, is another area that can be study in the future.
References


