

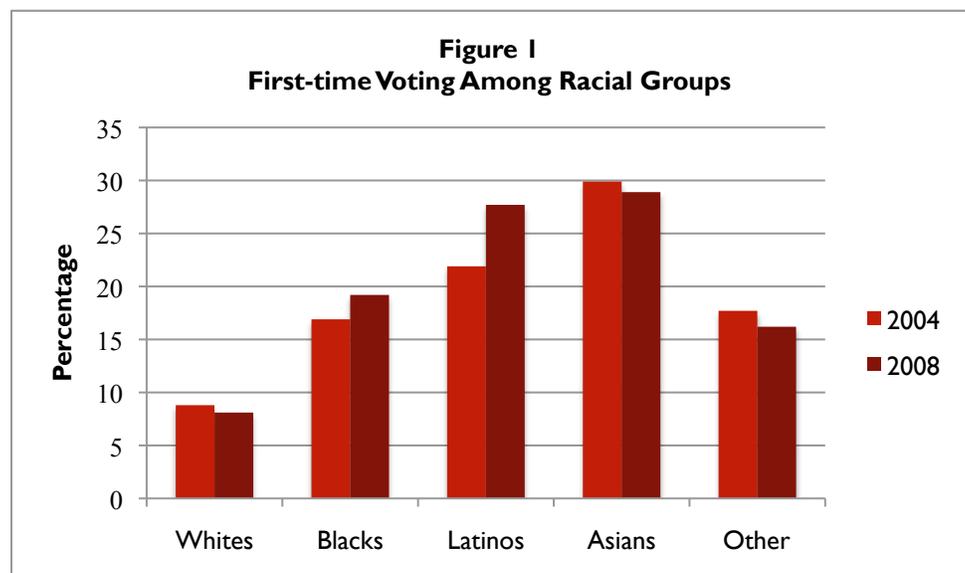
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First-Time Voters in the 2008 Election

by Lorraine C. Minnite

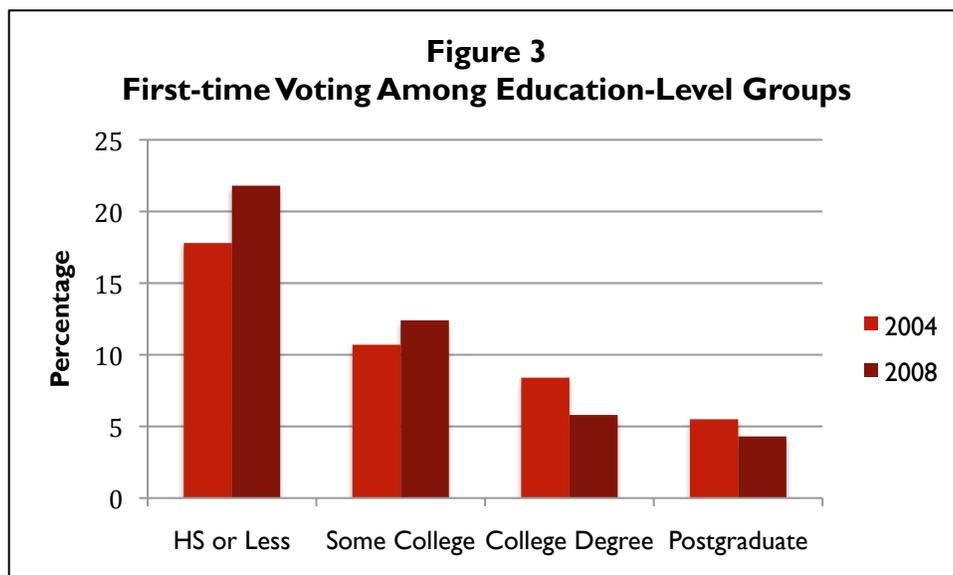
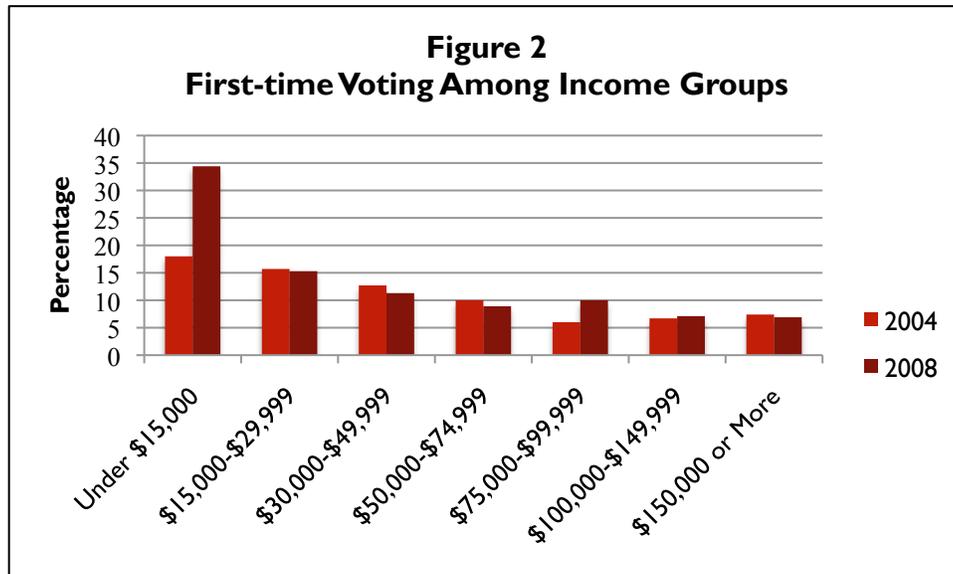
First-time voters may have determined the outcome of the 2008 presidential election. According to the 2008 National Election Day Exit Poll, of the 131,406,895 ballots counted in the 2008 election, approximately 15,112,000 ballots were cast by first-time voters.¹ As a percentage of total votes cast for the two major presidential candidates, first-time voters heavily weighted their support to Barack Obama, comprising nearly 15.2 percent of all votes cast for him, compared to 7.5 percent of all votes cast for Obama's opponent, John McCain.² Exit polls find that 68.7 percent or approximately 10,382,000 first-time voters cast their ballots for Obama, quite possibly exceeding his margin of victory over McCain by as many as one million votes.³

Trends among new voters in 2008 likely reflect the extraordinary work of non-partisan organizations to increase voter registration among low-income, minority and youth constituencies, and the effects of targeting and mobilization efforts by the Obama campaign.⁴ As a result, while the proportion of the electorate voting for the first time was virtually unchanged between 2004 and 2008 (11 percent in 2004 and 12 percent in 2008), the percentage of minority and low-income groups voting for the first time surged. In 2004, 17 percent of all black voters told survey researchers they were voting for the first time; in 2008, that number was 19 percent. This represents an estimated increase of 800,000 more black first-time voters in 2008 compared to 2004. Even more impressive, among Latinos some 22 percent voted for the first time in 2004, while 28 percent said they were voting for the first time in 2008 (see figure 1 and table 1).⁵



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But perhaps the most significant (and encouraging) change in the “first-time” voter group occurred along class lines. First-time voting among the lowest income group, those with annual family income of \$15,000 a year or less,⁶ nearly doubled in proportion among all voters in this income category, from 18 percent in 2004, to 34 percent in 2008. Among the least educated group, those with a high school diploma or less, first-time voters also increased their relative size, from 18 percent in 2004 to 22 percent in 2008, with most of the expansion of first-time voting occurring among those lacking a high school diploma. No other income or education groups experienced these rates of change in their patterns of electoral participation (see figures 2 and 3, and table 1). Change in the composition of the first-time voter group is summarized in table 2.



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New voters are disproportionately non-white compared to the national electorate as a whole; they also are drawn from a younger cohort than the national electorate (see figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4

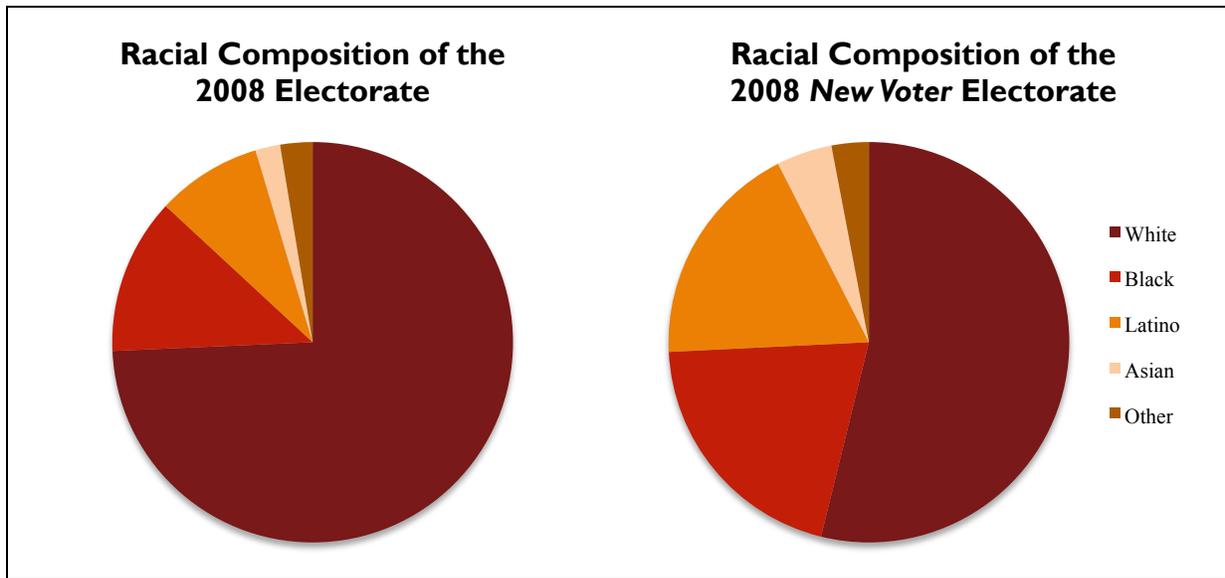
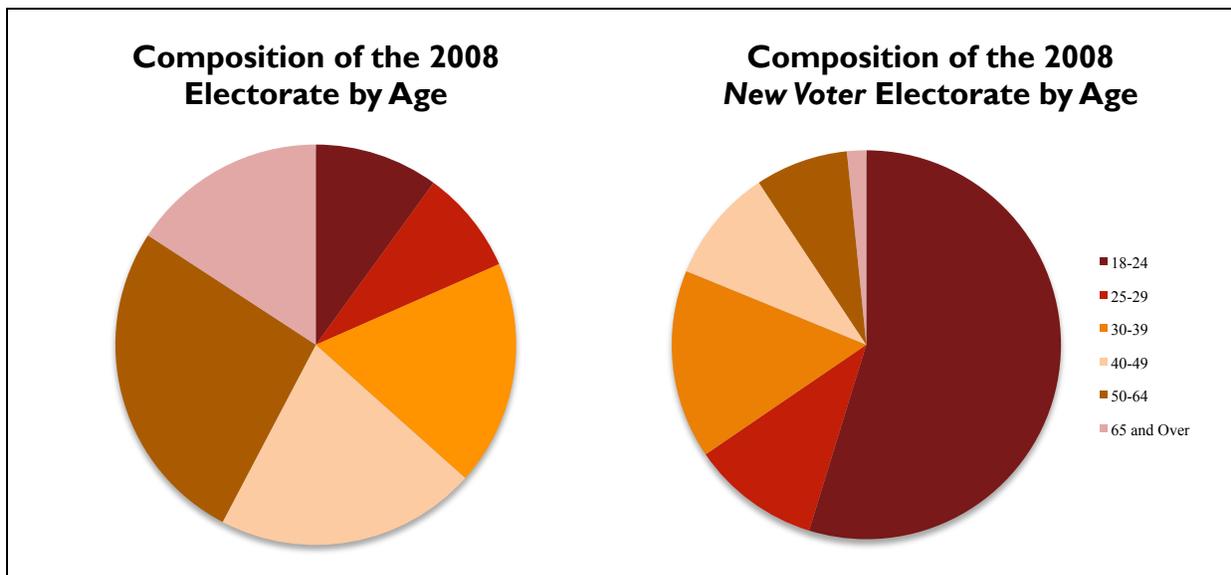


Figure 5



For these reasons, their issue profile tracks that of minorities and youth in a number of ways. According to a 2010 Project Vote survey of attitudes toward the role of government, one third of voters (34 percent) casting ballots for the first time in 2008 self-identify as “liberal” in describing their views on most political matters, compared to 20 percent of the national electorate, 27 percent of black voters, and 31 percent of voters under the age of 30.⁷ Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that new voters are strongly supportive of an activist role for the federal government in regulating the economy. Four out of five new voters (80 percent) favor raising the minimum wage

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so that workers depending on minimum wage jobs do not fall below the poverty line. This compares favorably to the views of black (83 percent) and younger (76 percent) voters, and all three groups are more supportive of raising the minimum wage than the national electorate as a whole (68 percent favor raising the minimum wage). New voters (by 79 percent) are even more supportive than black (71 percent) and younger voters (also by 71 percent) of increased federal spending on infrastructure and public works to address the nation's faltering economy; new voters exceed national levels of support for this strategy (at 68 percent) by 11 percentage points. New voters express similarly high levels of support for increasing state spending on education (86 percent want their state governments to spend more) as do black (at 89 percent) and younger voters (at 83 percent), and again, all three groups exceed levels of support for this position among voters nationally (at 68 percent).

Finally, across an array of economic issues, new voters trust government more than the private sector to address or remedy problems; in some cases levels of trust in government exceed those of black and younger voters, and again, all three groups are generally more trusting of government's role than the national electorate as a whole. For example, asked whether they trust government or the private sector more to clean up industrial pollution, three in five (61 percent) new voters said they trusted government more, compared to 55 percent of black voters, and 48 percent of younger voters. Nationally, a bare plurality of voters (44 percent) agreed (43 percent said they trusted the private sector more than government to address environmental pollution caused by industry). New voters trust the government more than the private sector to ensure that our food supply is safe (48 percent compared to 37 percent who trust business more); to protect consumers from fraud (62 percent, compared to 23 percent who trust business more); and to punish businesses engaging in racial discrimination (49 percent think government should penalize businesses that do this, compared to 42 percent who think that market forces can be relied upon to reduce discrimination).

The massive efforts of non-partisan voter registration drives and an engaging presidential race in 2008 swept a new cohort of voters into the electorate whose issue positions are to the left of center with respect to questions about the role of government. These voters may very well have handed Barack Obama his stunning victory. But there is a troubling indicator in Project Vote's survey results that deserves mention. Only 88 percent of 2008 first-time voters said that they were registered to vote at the address where they were living in the summer of 2010 when Project Vote conducted its poll. This is a full 10 percentage points lower than both the national electorate and black voters as a group, and five percentage points lower than youth voters as a group. New voters appear to be more mobile than other voters, which suggests they should be prime targets for renewed registration and voter mobilization efforts if the gains made in bringing them into the electorate are to be preserved.

Appendix

Table I
Proportion of Voters by Race, Education, Income, and Age Group
Who Voted for the First Time
2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections

	2004	2008
Race		
White	8.8	8.1
Black	16.9	19.2
Latino	21.9	27.7
Asian	29.9	28.9
Other	17.7	16.2
Education		
High School or Less	17.8	21.8
Some College/2-Yr. Degree	10.7	12.4
College Graduate	8.4	5.8
Postgraduate	5.5	4.3
Annual Family Income		
Under \$15,000	18.0	34.4
\$15,000-\$29,999	15.7	15.3
\$30,000-\$49,999	12.7	11.3
\$50,000-\$74,999	10.0	8.9
\$75,000-\$99,999	6.0	10.0
\$100,000-\$149,999	6.7	7.1
\$150,000 or More	7.4	6.9
Age		
18-29 Years	41.7	42.6
30-39 Years	8.8	9.8
40-49 Years	6.2	5.1
50-64 Years	2.4	3.3
65 Years and Older	2.5	1.1

Note: Data are weighted. The error due to sampling depends on the number of respondents in each group. For most questions, the margin of error is +/- 2-4 points. In addition to sampling error, difficulties in conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error.

Source: 2004 National Election Day Exit Poll, Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International, National Election Pool Poll #2004-NATELEC, November 2, 2004; 2008 National Election Day Exit Poll, Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International, National Election Pool Poll #2008-NATELEC, November 4, 2008, available at Roper Center for Public Opinion; author's calculations.

Table 2
Composition of First-time Voter Group
By Race, Education, Income and Age
2004 and 2008 Presidential Elections

	2004	2008
Race		
White	60.2	53.9
Black	17.6	20.3
Latino	16.3	18.3
Asian	3.6	4.5
Other	2.3	3.0
Education		
High School or Less	42.0	46.2
Some College/2-Yr. Degree	30.9	33.1
College Graduate	19.1	14.1
Postgraduate	8.0	6.6
Annual Family Income		
Under \$15,000	12.7	18.5
\$15,000-\$29,999	21.5	15.5
\$30,000-\$49,999	25.7	19.0
\$50,000-\$74,999	21.2	16.8
\$75,000-\$99,999	7.6	13.4
\$100,000-\$149,999	6.5	9.2
\$150,000 or More	4.8	7.5
Age		
18-29 Years	63.7	65.5
30-39 Years	14.1	15.7
40-49 Years	12.8	9.5
50-64 Years	5.8	7.8
65 Years and Older	3.6	1.5

Note: Data are weighted. The error due to sampling depends on the number of respondents in each group. For most questions, the margin of error is +/- 2-4 points. In addition to sampling error, difficulties in conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce other sources of error.

Source: 2004 National Election Day Exit Poll, Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International, National Election Pool Poll #2004-NATELEC, November 2, 2004; 2008 National Election Day Exit Poll, Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International, National Election Pool Poll #2008-NATELEC, November 4, 2008, available at Roper Center for Public Opinion; author's calculations.

Notes

1. U.S. Congress, Clerk of the House of Representatives, Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election of November 4, 2008, “Electoral Votes for President and Vice President, and Popular Votes for Presidential and Vice-Presidential Electors, Election of Nov. 4, 2008,” compiled by Lorraine C. Miller, July 10, 2009.
2. 2008 National Election Day Exit Poll, Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International, National Election Pool Poll #2008-NATELEC, November 4, 2008, available at Roper Center for Public Opinion.
3. According to the officially certified results of the 2008 election, Barack Obama’s margin of victory over John McCain was 9,550,176 votes. See U.S. Congress, Clerk of the House of Representatives, Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election of November 4, 2008, “Electoral Votes for President and Vice President, and Popular Votes for Presidential and Vice-Presidential Electors.” Because exit polls are samples of the electorate, sampling error must be taken into account, which means that the estimate of the number of ballots cast for Obama by first-time voters falls within a range of possible estimates of at least 2-4 percentage points higher or lower than 10.5 million ballots.
4. According to an independent analysis of the non-partisan voter registration drives that were conducted in 2007 and 2008 and helped to register more than two million voters, these efforts disproportionately benefitted racial minorities, youth and low-income voters. See Ethan Roeder, “Voter Registration Analysis ’08: Evaluating Voter Registration Efforts from the 2008 Election Cycle,” New Organizing Institute, December 14, 2009, 11. On the Obama campaign’s targeting strategies, see Michael P. McDonald and Thomas F. Schaller, “Voter Mobilization in the 2008 Election,” in David B. Magleby, ed. The Change Election: Money, Mobilization and Persuasion in the 2008 Federal Election (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 87-107.
5. The certified vote count in 2004 was 122,349,480. See U.S. Congress, Clerk of the House of Representatives, Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election of November 2, 2004, “Electoral Votes for President and Vice President, and Popular Votes for Presidential and Vice-Presidential Electors, Election of Nov. 4, 2008,” compiled by Jeff Trandahl, June 7, 2005.
6. National median income for a family of four in 2009 was \$62,363. See U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005-2009 5-Year Estimates, Table S1901, “Income in the Past 12 Months (In 2009 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars),” accessed online, March 20, 2011, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00_S1901&-ds_name=ACS_2009_5YR_G00.
7. For a more detailed report on the survey’s findings, see Lorraine C. Minnite, *What Happened to Hope and Change? A Poll of 2008 Voters*, Project Vote, September 2010; available at <http://www.projectvote.org/voter-poll-results.html>.

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, litigation, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies can register, vote, and cast ballots that count.

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