

# YOUTH TURNOUT IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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# Resumé

## Unge valgdeltagelse i amerikanske præsidentvalg

Valgdeltagelse i amerikanske præsidentvalg er et meget omdiskuteret emne. Der findes mange forklaringer på hvorfor amerikanerne vælger at gå til stemmeurnerne eller ej. De fleste studier fokuserer på en nedadgående tendens i amerikansk valgdeltagelse, men ved nærmere undersøgelse af vælgernes fremmøde i perioden 1988 til 2008 fremgår det, at der er tale om en svingende kurve frem for en nedadgående kurve. Valgdeltagelsen blandt de amerikanske unge i alderen 18 til 29 viser især store udsving.

Efter det amerikanske præsidentvalg i 2008, blev den nuværende Præsident Barack Obama tilskrevet æren for at have genereret det højeste fremmøde af unge vælgere siden 1992. Strategien i hans valgkampagne, hvor han ville nå ud til de unge vælgere via deres egne kommunikationsmidler, blev af mange fremlagt som forklaringen på hans succes. Strategien var baseret på brug af mobiltelefoner og sociale medier som Facebook og Twitter.

På trods af den høje valgdeltagelse i 2008 var selve stigningen i valgdeltagelsen ikke den største. Valgdeltagelsen blandt unge var steget betydeligt mere under valgene i 1992 og 2004. Dette tyder på, at unge vælgere tidligere er blevet mobiliseret af andre faktorer end ungdomsorienterede valgkampagner.

Denne afhandling vil undersøge hvad der ligger til grund for de til tider store svingninger i unges valgdeltagelse i amerikanske præsidentvalg. Der vil være fokus på institutionsprægede faktorer i form af det amerikanske registrerings- og valgsystem, og ikke-institutionsprægede faktorer i form af økonomi og kulturkrig om sociale emner. Faktorerne vil blive undersøgt ved hjælp af teorierne "old institutionalism" og "rational choice". Den klassiske institutionalisme undersøger det politiske system og dets institutioners påvirkning af vælgernes adfærd. Teorien om den rationelle beslutningstager anskuer valgdeltagelse som en beslutningsproces baseret på vælgernes egeninteresse.

Indflydelsen af det amerikanske registrerings- og valgsystem er belyst ved hjælp af en komparativ analyse af de politiske institutioner og valgdeltagelse på tværs af nationer samt for-

bundsstaterne. Økonomiens effekt undersøges ved at demonstrere den mulige sammenhæng mellem relevante økonomiske indikatorer og valgdeltagelsen. Problemstillingen angående kulturkrigen illustreres ved at identificere den politiske og ideologiske holdning blandt unge, samt fastslå betydning af emner som homoseksualitet og frivillige aborter i valg med høj valgdeltagelse.

Der er fremsat mange forskellige forklaringer for unges svingende valgdeltagelse, såsom at unge skal mobiliseres til at stemme af kandidater eller andre organisationer som følge af begrænsninger forårsaget af de institutionsprægede faktorer. Afhandlingens konklusion er, at denne forklaring ikke er sand. De institutionsprægede faktorer er konstante institutioner, som ikke har ændret sig i løbet af tidsperioden, og kan derved ikke forklare den svingende valgdeltagelse. Derimod afhænger unges valgdeltagelse af variable faktorer som økonomien og kulturkrig, da disse faktorer påvirker deres egeninteresse.

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## Introduction

*“Barack Obama's campaign politicized and organized more youth than any campaign has in recent history.”*

- The editors, American Prospect {{93 The Editors 2008}}

*...And now to have the presidential candidates to actually addressing young people, talking about their issues, using the tools like cell phones that really speak to them, are their communication tool. I think you are gonna see record turnout amongst young people that are really fostered by the attention of the campaign.”*

- Executive director of Rock the Vote, Heather Smith, in an interview with Katie Couric {{94 Couric, Katie 2008}}.

In the 2008 American Presidential election, the youth turnout rate was the highest since the 1992 election. Obama received two thirds of the youth's votes, and has therefore, by the media be identified as the reason for young voters' turnout. However, the increase in youth turnout was not the most significant increase experienced between elections. In 2008, youth turnout had increased with 2.1 percentage points, whereas the increase in turnout was 8.7 percentage points from 2000 to 2004 {{95 CIRCLE 2010}}. The difference in the increases suggests that Obama was not a mobilization factor per se. In 2004, the turnout among young people increased significantly, and this happened without the campaign efforts of 2008. In fact, the electoral participation of young Americans has fluctuated in the last six presidential elections, which indicates that it is other factors than campaign efforts that affects youth turnout. Therefore, this thesis will try to answer:

### ***Why has the United States experienced fluctuations in youth turnout in Presidential Elections?***

The fluctuations in young people's electoral participation are interesting to examine because of the tendency to ascribe young voters as apathetic and therefore they need to be mobilized to vote by campaigns. This assumption forms basis on a perception of young voters' electoral participation is limited by the political institutions that set the electoral rules of participation.

The organization Rock the Vote (RTV), who organize registration events, has also been credited a role in the high turnout of 1992, 2004 and 2008. RTV points out that the need for mobilization is due to the American registration system. The majority of first time voters and registrants are young people and the multistep process of the registration system pose a barrier for electoral participation.

The candidates' mobilization campaigns are also connected to the institution of the Electoral College. The Electoral College not only sets forth the rules of elections, but it has also created a two party system. The dominance of the Democratic and Republican Party as well as the different level of dominance through the states have created difference in mobilization effort as well as difference in state turnouts. The allocation of campaign resources in competitive states has been argued to drive up turnout rates on the national level.

However, the RTV's effort to mobilize young voters through registration did not succeed in the year after 1992. In 1996, RTV announced it had added an additionally 50 0,000 young registrants {{74 Hoover, Michael 2007}}, but the turnout rate slumped 12.4 percent {{95 CIRCLE 2010}}. The fact that turnout decreased despite adding new registrants suggests that there must have been other factors influencing turnout. The American registration system and the Electoral College are not new phenomena to electoral participation, and therefore these institutions can probably not explain fluctuation in youth turnout. This indicates that other variables factors should be more likely to explain why young people determine to vote in election and to abstain in another.

Factors that have varied from election to elections are the economy and the culture war on social issues. The state of the economy and the presence of culture war are different in each election, and so is voters' perception of its importance to their vote. In 1992 and 2004, the state of the economy was not considered good and was prioritized by most young voters as the top issue facing the nation. The same applied to the social issues of homosexuality and abortion, which had emerged as national issues and considered as important by young people.

It is relevant to examine fluctuations in youth turnout due to general focus on low turnout among young people in comparison to the rest of the electorate. The peaks in turnout suggest that young people do vote, and therefore it is also important to establish the factors that spark the act of electoral participation.

## **Theory and Methodology**

In the attempt to explain fluctuations in youth turnout, this thesis will establish and examine possible factors. The basis of the examination will be the theory of old institutionalism and the rational choice theory. Polling material as well as academic article and studies will be used in the analysis of the factors' effect on turnout.

The research question gives rise to divide the thesis into two sections of possible influential factors. The first two chapters of the analysis will examine the effect of institutional factors on youth turnout, while the last two chapters of the analysis will focus on the effect of non-institutional factors. The institutional factors subject to examination are the American registration system and the Electoral College. The study of non-institutional factors focuses on the economy and the culture war on social issues. Therefore, this thesis will employ the theory of old institutionalism and the rational choice theory as the underlying tools for the examination of the factors influencing turnout.

To explore the theory of old institutionalism, the thesis will draw on chapter two by R.A.W Rhodes in the book "Theory and Methods in Political Science". The chapter gives an outline of the different approaches to old institutionalism. This thesis will employ empirical sources for the analysis of factors. The academic journals of Bingham G. Powell and Walter D. Burnham help put the institutions in a comparative perspective. The work of Steven J. Rosenstone and Raymond E. Wolfinger determine the effect of change in registration system while the journal on "Election-day registration" helps examine the effect of different registration laws between states. In a study of his, Richard Cebula has pointed out the connection between the Electoral College and voter participations rates, which helps identify how the Electoral College create different environments for participation. The different arguments will be supported by data from research centers like the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (Pew) and the Center of Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

The rational choice theory will be explored by the use of the book "Rational Choice and Politics – A Critical Introduction" by Stephen Parson which provides a presentation of the theory in politics. The analysis of the economy will mainly be based on the academic study

“Economic Adversity and Voter Turnout” of Rosenstone, which set forth three arguments of the economy as a mobilization factor. The arguments are tested by means of economic figures offered by the Labor Force Statistics and The Bureau of Economic Analysis as well as opinion polls from Pew. The background on the term culture is offered by the book “Culture wars: The struggle to define America” of James D. Hunter. The analysis of the social issues is based on the journal “It's the Abortion, Stupid” of Allan I. Abramowitz as well as polls from Pew and CIRCLE. A study on voter turnout and vote choice by James Adams, Jay Dow and Samuel Merrill offers the argument of how the perceived differences between candidates mobilizes voters. Articles from news papers like the New York Times will be used to as source of states from candidates or voters to support arguments.

### **Institutionalism**

The examination of the American registration system and the Electoral College will be based on the theory of institutionalism. Institutionalism is a science of the state, which suggests that the best way to understand political behavior is to examine the environment where such action takes place. The political environment is made up by rules that are formal like constitutional rule or informal such as cultural norms. These rules are the institutions which shape political behavior, and create organized politics {{37 Steinmo, Sven 2001}}. The theory is a central pillar of political science, because there is no denial of the existence of state systems {{24 Rhodes, R. A. W. 1995/s57;}}. In other words, institutions matters due to the powerful role of laws, customs and established practices in shaping the behavior of individuals. The types of rules provide two different approaches to institutions in form of the old institutionalism and the new institutionalism. The old institutionalism focuses on how the formal rules of the political environment shape political behavior. The registration system and the Electoral College fall within the category of formal rules that organize citizen's electoral behavior.

Thus, the theory of old institutionalism will be applied to the chapters of the American registration system and the Electoral College. There are three different methods on how to study institutions within the approach of the old institutionalism. One method is the descriptive-inductive method, which employs the analytical tool of historians to explain current phenomena. The method believes that description of past events, eras, people and

institutions provides facts to understand the current situation in the present. For example, the rules in the current society exist due to events that happened in the past. In other words, contemporary political behavior can be explained by examining particular events in the past and the development of institutions throughout history {{24 Rhodes, R. A. W. 1995/s44;}}. In the U.S. the current institutions are either set forth by the U.S. Constitution or are products of the framework of the Constitution. This means that the U.S. Constitution, despite dating back to the Founding Fathers, sets the electoral rules of the present and thereby the electoral behavior of the present.

The formal-legal approach is another method to study institutions. This method uses the techniques of lawyers to explain political behavior through the study of public law concerning governmental organizations. The claim of this method is that democracies function due to legal rules and procedures. The legal elements in this method mostly involves the study of written constitutions, but can also go beyond and consider the system of political institutions e.g. an electoral system which is a development of the written constitution, but not directly mentioned in the design {{24 Rhodes, R. A. W. 1995/s44-46;}}. In short, legal rules affect the democracy of a nation, which means the legal rules of the U.S. affect how American citizens can participate in political events. The formal-legal approach to the American institutions is connected the first method, since the registration system and the term “Electoral College” are not directly mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, but originated from it. Besides the uniform rules set forth by the U.S. Constitution, the federal states have the power to designate requirements of electoral participation as well as how to translate votes into governmental power.

The final method is the historical-comparative, which states that institutions’ effect on political behavior can be explained through comparison to institutions in other systems of government. It is not enough to compare behavior to behavior of other nations, but it is necessary to compare institutions across nations. A comparative examination of institutions in form of their operations should explain the wherefore of electoral behavior {{24 Rhodes, R. A. W. 1995/s46;}}. This means that electoral behavior is explained by comparing the institutions such as the American registration system and the Electoral College with registration and electoral systems of other democracies.

According to the theory of old institutionalism, electoral behavior of young Americans should be explained by the institutions that shape electoral behavior. The institutions which shape electoral behavior are the rule of participation in form of the American registration system and the rule of voting in form of the Electoral College. The theory provides the approach to explain the affects of the institutions through a comparison of institutions across nations. Also, an examination of the different registration laws within the U.S., as well as the measures taken to liberalize registration laws could establish the electoral behavior of the youth. It will also include an assessment of the Electoral College, and how the rules of translating votes into power have created different environments for participation.

### **Rational Choice**

The old institutionalism has been criticized to be too formal and insensitive to the non-political factors of political behavior. Therefore, the second part of this thesis will examine whether youth turnout is influenced by non-institutional factors. Rational Choice Theory forms the basis for the study of the economy and the culture war's effect on fluctuations in turnout among young Americans. The Rational Choice theory claims that voting behavior is not constrained by the rules of formal or informal institutions, but that voters are autonomous actors. Citizens' decision to vote is based on a calculation that maximizes the voters' personal interest.

The basic idea behind the theory is that individuals are rational and have well-ordered preferences. Individuals strive to satisfy these preferences with every action they perform, and therefore, these actions are subject to a calculation of the benefits and costs associated with the performances. The benefits depend on the preferences, and how the action will satisfy the preference. However, the attempt to satisfy the preferences is limited to the individual's resources available to perform the action. This turns individuals into calculators who weigh the benefits against the cost of various actions available, and rationally choose the action with the greater benefit for their preferences {{85 Parsons,Stephen 2005}}

This means that the act of voting is a rational process of which an individual calculates the benefits and costs associated with electoral participation. The calculus of voting is a decision-making process where the voter estimates the benefits he or she will receive from going to the

ballot on Election Day, and whether or not it will outweigh the costs related to the same act. A rational voter will only vote if the marginal of the benefits is perceived higher than the marginal of the cost. If the voter decides that the marginal of both benefits and costs are equal the voter becomes indifferent and abstains.

There are different definitions of the benefits associated with voting. There are the potential benefits, which are linked to the option of political parties or candidate available in a given election. In other words, the voters will estimate the marginal of benefits associated with voting for a certain party or candidate compared to the marginal of costs. The potential benefits for an individual in elections are the benefits he or she will gain if their preferred candidate takes office in comparison to the benefits received if the less preferred candidate wins. The greater the difference between the two candidates, the greater is the potential benefits of voting {{ 102 Blais, André 2000 }}.

Another way to perceive the benefits of voting is the expected benefits. The expected benefits involve the calculus of the preferred candidate's chances of winning or losing and how the citizen's vote will have a decisive effect on the outcome. If the chances for either victory or defeat is high for the preferred candidate then the expected benefits will be zero, however if the election is a close race for both candidates the expected benefits will higher {{ 102 Blais, André 2000 }}

Voting could be considered as a zero-cost activity meeting some bureaucratic requirements, but it can also be perceived as more effort full. Despite meeting the requirements for eligibility, citizens need to register before voting. This can be considered as a cost, because not only do citizens need to spent time to register, but they also need to obtain information on where, when and how to register. The same apply to the act of voting, which acquires means of transportation and time to go to the polling place, as well as the knowledge of where to go. Besides the knowledge of the polling place's location, citizens also need to obtain information about the candidates in order to vote for the candidate that maximizes their personal interest.

The rational choice theory identify that voters are mobilized to participate based on what will maximize their personal interest. This suggests that the state of the economy and the culture

war are relevant factors to examine. Voters go through the decision process in every election, and given the factors are variables the voter will have a different incentive to vote in one election than in another. Therefore will the outcome of elections also varies. Young voters will calculate whether or not electoral participation will improve their personal interest. The culture war aspect is related to the rational choice theory because of differences in candidates' position on issues and moral values. The distinction between candidates results in different outcome in form of the type of presidency, and therefore will young voters weigh the cost and benefits associated with the choice of candidates. If the difference between the two candidates is perceived as significant, it can mobilize young voters to electoral participation to ensure that the victory of the candidate perceived as most acceptable.

### **Polling Material**

In order to carry out the examinations suggested by the theories, this thesis will rely on polling material from research centers such as the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (Pew) and the Center of Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). Polls provide an insight into young voters' perception of factors important to their vote, and suggest what is important to their electoral participation. However, data from polls have margin of errors that can distort the argument of the thesis. Sample sizes are often 1100 to 1500 respondents, which can be considered as a small in when it represents the opinion of an entire nation. Also, polls can be misleading due to the wording of the questions. Respondents can either be provided with a fixed list of answers to choose from or a list with open-end questions. There are different opinions between pollster of which method is the correct method. This will be discussed in the chapter of the culture war when the importance of social issues is established.

Regarding the sample sizes, the polling material also constitutes a problem because the definition of young voters varies. Young voters and the youth are terms that are used extensively throughout this thesis, but the sources can differ in the age cohort covering these terms. The low end of the age cohort is 18 due to the passage of the 26<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment in 1971, which lowered the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 old. The high end of the age cohort differs across sources. At times, CIRCLE uses the age cohort of 18 to 25 to define young voters, and at other times the age of 18 to 29. The general term used by

pollster like Pew is the age range of 18 to 29 years old. Since the majority of sources uses the age range of 18 to 29, it will be the age cohort of which this thesis refers to when mention young voter, young Americans and the youth. It will be noted if figures represent otherwise.

A final consideration is the amount of data available from the sources. The thesis have chosen to focus is research in a period of twenty years, from 1988 to 2008. This large time span has created problems with the collection of data from the years prior the millennium. The use of polls to analyze elections has intensified along with the digital age, as well as the polls extensiveness of the subjects. Therefore, data from the elections of 2004 and 2008 has been easily obtainable, while it has proven difficult to collect relevant data from the 1992 and 1996 elections. This means that sometime the attitude from 2004 and 2008 will be reflected on to the elections of 1992 and 1996. It will be noted if data from later elections is applied to earlier elections, and on which grounds this comparison is made.

### **Voting population**

The thesis questions the fluctuations in youth turnout, and thus there is much referral to the turn out rates of young people. However, there are different methods to measure the turnout rates. It is claimed that the most accurate methods to measure turnout is to only include the voting population that is eligible to vote. This is known as the voting-eligible population (VEP), which excludes people who are ineligible to vote due to non-citizenship or criminality in form of convicted felons and prison inmates. The standard method of measuring turnout is based on the numbers of the voting-age population (VAP). The VAP includes the part of the population who are old enough to vote, which means U.S. residents of 18 years and above. This also means inclusion of the ineligible voters {{99 Mcdonald, Michael P.}}. Regardless which method is the most accurate method, this thesis use figures based on the VAP due to difficulties finding youth turnout rates based on VEP. Most of the sources have either referred to or based their calculation on figures from the Current Population Survey (CPS) of the U.S. Bureau of the Consensus which are based on.

## Registration Systems

*Rock the Vote (RTV) identified the American registration system as the factor that affects youth turnout the most and this could explain the fluctuations in youth turnout from 1988 to 2008. In comparison to other institutions registration laws can have greater impact on turnout, because it directly affects turnout in form of restricting access to the voting booth* {{39 Powell, G. Bingham}}

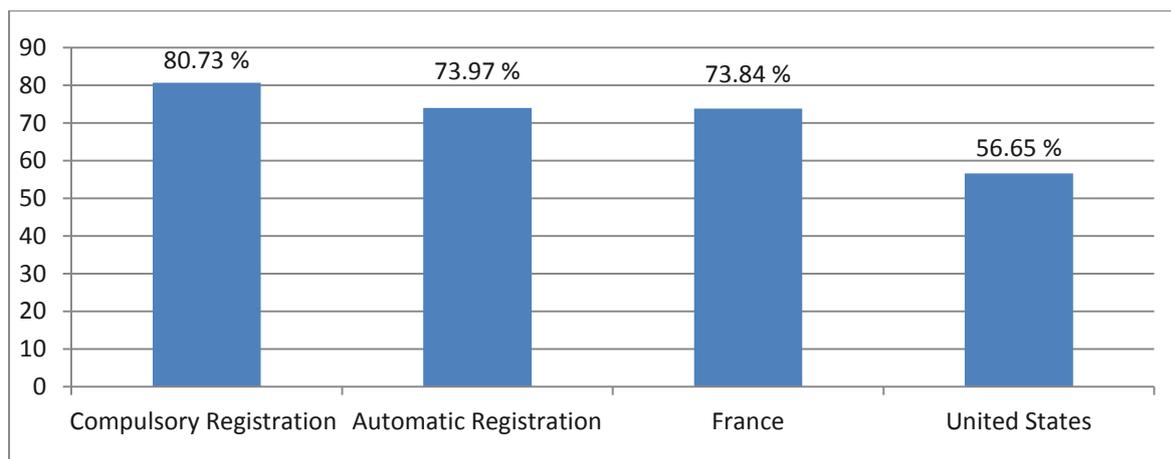
Before examining RTV's claim of the registration system's effect on youth turnout, it is essential to establish why the registration system is important to young people. A report on youth registration issued in 2008 by the Center of Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) stated that registration is important, because it is a multi-step process that can make registration more difficult than the act of voting itself. Registration requires knowledge about where, how and when to register {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s1;}}, and is considered as a cost of voting. It is important for youth turnout, because a large share of the youth electorate is first time voters. In 2000, more than 30 percent of the 18 to 29 years old was new voters, and in 2004, it increased to more than 40 percent {{48 Marcelo, Karlo Barrios 2008/s2;}}. According to national exit polls, in 2000 and 2004 about two thirds of all first-time voters were young people {{48 Marcelo, Karlo Barrios 2008/s2;}}. The effect of the registration system is minimal to experienced voters, who once registered only have to re-register if they change permanent residency, name or in some states party choice. This means that the majority of registrants are young people, which indicate that the American registration system affects youth turnout more than the rest of the electorate.

### Registration Systems in Comparison

In order to ascertain a possible effect of the American registration system, it is necessary to establish whether systems of registration have an impact on turnout. This includes a comparison of registration systems and general turnout rates across industrialized nations. There are variations in registration systems and turnout rates across the world, which indicate that there exist a possible link between the type of registration system and the level of turnout. The American registration system is voluntary, and entails that citizens are responsible for

establishing their eligibility to vote. This is done through a trip to the government locations, online or through mail. Many other countries such as Denmark, Germany, Japan, Israel and Canada have automatic voter registration that leaves the responsibility of voter registration to the government. Nations like Australia and New Zealand have compulsory registration laws that require citizens to register. Figure 1 below presents the mean turnout rates from 1986 through 2008 for the three kinds of registration systems in selected industrialized democracies.<sup>1</sup> The chart displays a mean turnout rate of 80.73 percent in countries with compulsory registration. Nations with automatic registration systems have a mean turnout rate of 73.97 percent, while the two voluntary registration nations have a rate of 73.84 percent in France and 56.65 percent in the US<sup>2</sup>. The calculation reveals a significant difference in turnout between the two voluntary registration nations. France has a mean turnout rate equal to the automatic registration nations, whereas turnout in the US is substantially lower.

**Figure 1** Comparative Turnouts by Registration Systems, 1986-2008



Source: Adapted from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Voter Turnout Base*, <http://www.idea.int/vt/viewdata.cfm>. Gans, Cutis, *Voter Turnout in the United States 1788-2008*, CQ Press (2011)

If the turnout rate from US and France had been displayed as a combined rate of the voluntary registration nations, the chart would demonstrate that compulsory and automatic registration systems generate higher turnout than voluntary registration systems. A study of

<sup>1</sup> Compulsory registration nations are: Australia and New Zealand. Automatic registration nations are: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and United Kingdom. Voluntary registration nations are: France and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Both France and the US have presidential as well as parliamentary elections whereas the other selected nations only have parliamentary elections. Due to the focus of presidential elections in the research question, the calculation of the mean turnout rates for both countries has been based on presidential turnout rates only.

the American voter turnout in a comparative perspective predicts that national implementation of automatic registration in the US would increase overall turnout in presidential elections. The study suggests that automatic registration would place the U.S. on ten percentage points below other nations. {{39 Powell, G. Bingham /s35;}}. A study on registration laws' effect on American turnout presents similar findings. It estimates that a liberalization of registration laws would result in an increase of nine percentage points in total turnout {{40 Rosenstone, Steven J. /s41;}}. However, these predicted increases in American turnout are still not close to the turnout rates of the other nations presented in figure 1. This indicates that it is not the voluntary registration system that affects American turnout.

On the other hand, the turnout rate in France contradicts that the voluntary registration system depress turnout. The different turnout rates in France and the U.S. suggests that registration systems do not affect turnout. Despite a voluntary registration system, France had a mean turnout rate equal to the countries with compulsory and automatic registration. The French turnout rate emphasizes that that voluntary registration systems do not necessarily cause lower turnout, or that compulsory and automatic registration systems do not automatically increase turnout.

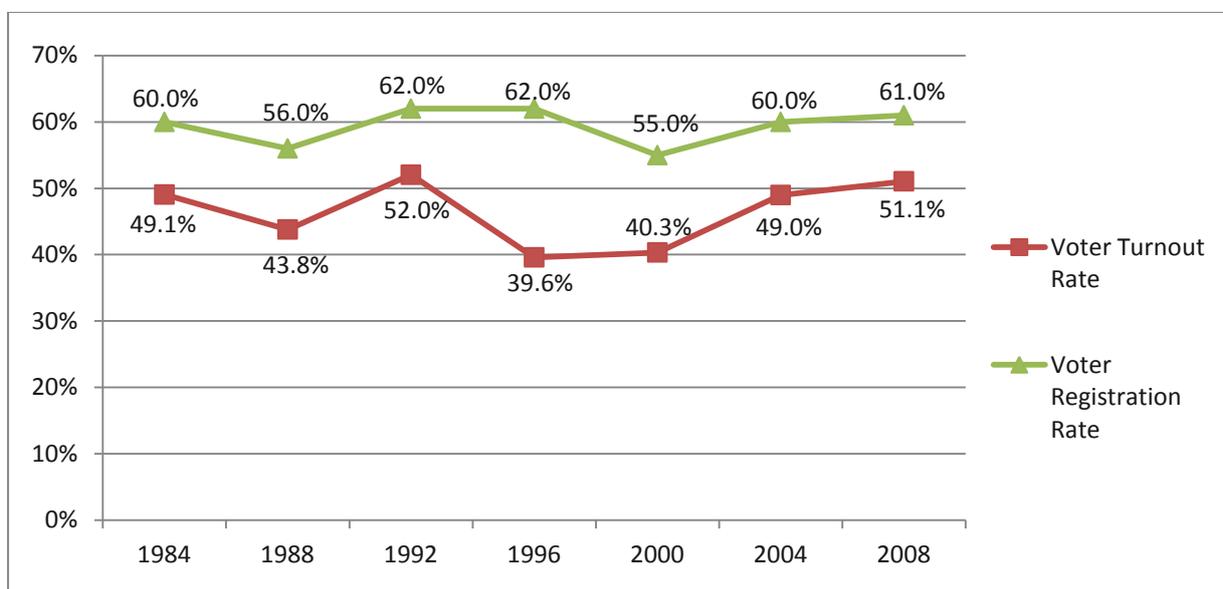
This is also suggested by a survey on eligible voters in states with or without registration requirements from 1964. According to the survey, turnout was higher when citizens were required to register. It could be argued that the requirement of registration ensures registration of politically engaged citizens. Such citizens are more likely and motivated to vote because of their active investment in the act of voting. In contrast, automatic registration of the eligible voting population would include citizens who normally would not voluntarily register. These citizens probably will still not be motivated to vote due to lack of interest {{41 Erikson,R.S. /s272-275;}}. According to the survey, higher registration rates than turnout rates should not be possible. The voluntary registration should sort out the politically detached citizens who are not motivated to participate. However, registration rates are still higher than the turnout rates among young Americans, despite the voluntary registration, figure 2 {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010}}.

An explanation for the difference in registration and turnout rate could be registration events. The events could register voters who normally would not be motivated to vote. An example of such is youth registration by Rock the Vote (RTV). In 1992, RTV cooperated with the

music channel MTV and pop stars like Madonna. This was an attempt to motivate electoral participation of young people through music and popular culture. RTV has been criticized for driving up the registration rates without getting young people to vote. RTV established the organization's success in 1992, with the high turnout rate in the election. The organization proclaimed that it had enrolled 350,000 new registrants, and thereby contributed to the increase in youth turnout.

However, the claimed success of the organization was not evident in the 1996 election. RTV announced that the organization's effort had added 500,000 new registrants. Despite this effort, the turnout rate decreased 12.4 percentage points and remained low until 2004 (figure 2). A Pew survey revealed that 64 percent of the 18 to 29 year olds never or hardly never watched MTV, and that could explain the high registration rates and low turnout rates. In 2004, turnout increased again, and it could be credited to the work of RTV. On the other hand, the claim of high registration numbers in elections with low participation suggests that the registration drives register voters, who normally would not be motivated to vote {{74 Hoover, Michael 2007/s147-153;}}.

**Figure 2** Mean Rates of Youth Registration and Turnout, 1984-2008



Source: Adapted from the Center of Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *A Voter Turnout Time Series for 1972-2010*, (17 April 2012), <http://www.civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/>.

As the matter stands, the difference in turnout rates between the two countries with voluntary registration systems signify that differences in registration systems do not explain differences

in turnout. Therefore can the voluntary registration system not be defined as a factor influencing youth turnout in the US. Instead, the effect of the American registration system could be caused by variations in registration laws between federal states. The individual states decide the requirements of voter eligibility {{33 Ashbee,Edward 2004}}, and that has created different registration laws from state to state.

### **Variation in Registration Laws**

The effect of registration laws on electoral participation has been pointed out by young Americans themselves. Thus, it can be argued that registration laws affect electoral participation among young voters. Besides the lack of political interest, young Americans have, identified states' registration laws as the reason for not registering. 21 percent claimed they did not meet registration deadline, six percent admitted they did not know how or where to register, four percent stated they did not meet residency requirements, while seven percent was not eligible voters according to the registration requirements {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s2;}}.

One impact of registration laws is the fluctuations in youth turnout between states. The U.S. Constitution presents some uniform voter eligibility requirements. In order to vote, an individual must contain U.S. citizenship by birth or naturalization, be the minimum age of 18 by Election Day, and registration shall take place in the state and county where the citizen is a legal resident {{11 U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2006/s2-3;}}. Besides these uniform requirements, the states can designate other requirements of registration<sup>3</sup>. This has resulted in different registration laws between the states, which also have created differences in turnout rates.

One difference between states is the deadline for registration. 21 percent of young voters pointed out registration deadlines as the reason for non-registration. These deadlines can cause differences in youth turnout among states. Most states have a registration deadline of 25 to 30 days prior Election Day, while others have extended deadlines. For example, Alabama has a deadline of ten days prior, Maine offers registration on Election Day, whereas North Dakota has no registration requirements {{11 U.S. Election Assistance Commission

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<sup>3</sup> States' requirements for registration must not violate citizens' constitutional rights.

2006/s2,8,9,15;}}. Citizens living in North Dakota and Maine have fewer barriers for electoral participation than citizens in Arkansas. In North Dakota, citizens can vote on Election Day without any requirements of registration and eligible voters in Maine have the opportunity of Election Day Registration (EDR). However, eligible voters in Arkansas have to remember registration by a certain day before the elections.

A study on EDR's effect on low-turnout groups suggests that EDR is an influential factor to the composition of the electorate. Youth turnout was higher in states offering EDR compared to those with registration deadlines {{42 Knack,Stephen /s31-32;}}.The difference is evident in the states' youth registration and turnout figures. In 2008, the average turnout rate in states offering EDR was 59 percent, which was nine percentage points higher than the average turnout rate in states without EDR {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s1-2;}}. Main experienced a registration rate of 55.4 percent, and it was approximately 10 percentage point higher than the registration rate of 46.6 percent in Arkansas. The turnout difference in the two state was also about 22 percentage points with a turnout rate of 35.3 percent in Arkansas and 47.8 percent in Main {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s1-2;}}. The difference between the two states indicates that liberalization of registration laws increases turnout, while it suggests that voluntary registration do not generating higher turnout.

Another registration law that can affect electoral participation of young people is the issue of residency. This is based on a study that has examined the relationship between age and voter turnout. Electoral participation of the youth is affected by registration laws, because it depends on residency. Young people have higher mobility rate than older citizens. This is often related to attending educational programs and becoming independent from their parents {{43 Ansolabehere, Stephen 2011}}. As mentioned before, citizens have to re-register every time they change residency to another state or county, and that increases the cost of voting for people with high mobility. It has especially been an issue for young Americans obtaining higher education.

Time and again, university or college students have been accused of fraud or received warnings of economic consequences, due to the widespread practice of using college or university addresses for registration. The problem is the definition of the legal address used for registration. A college address is technically not a legal residence if students are economically dependent on the parents for income as well as health and car insurance. The issue of residency

can still be an effect to youth turnout, despite a US Supreme Court ruling. In 1979, the US Supreme Court affirmed that it was against the Twenty-sixth Amendment to deny students the right to vote in the states where they attend school {{13 Justia Company 1979}}.

As late as the 2008 election, student registration still faced the problem of the legal criteria of residency. During a voter-registration drive on Virginia Tech Campus in Montgomery County, students received a memo from the county's general registrar, E. Randall Wertz. The memo stated the consequences students could face if their college address was used for registration. In reference to the Code of Virginia, the release proclaimed that students could use their college residence as a legal address for registration in Montgomery County. The address would then become the students' permanent legal residences, and thereby declare them economically independent from their parents. The statement was later contradicted as incorrect by the Internal Revenue Service the same year {{6 Lewin, Tamar 2008}}. The release also stated that scholarships attached to the former residence could be lost along with the coverage of their parents' health and car insurance.

The release could have raised doubt about whether or not electoral participation would be worth the financial consequences. Civil rights lawyers identified the guidelines as problematic and as infringement on students' rights. Even though a second corrected memo was released, the director of the Voting Rights Project at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Jon Greenbaum, still found it discouraging for students {{6 Lewin, Tamar 2008}}. The residency issue could make young people abstain from registering, and cause lower turnout.

However, it is difficult to ascribe fluctuations in turnout to specific cases on specific locations. The discouragement mentioned by Greenbaum was not evident in the registration and turnout rate among young people with higher educational attainment. In 2008, 78.1 percent of young people with a B.A. or more registered {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s6;}} and 62.1 percent voted {{18 Kirby, Emily 2009/s6;}}. The general registrar later estimated that only 25 of 2000 students had canceled the processing of their registration {{14 Redden, Elizabeth 2008}}. In general, the 2008 youth registration rate as well as turnout rate were the highest since 1996 (figure 2), and only four percent used the reason of not meeting residency requirements as the reason for abstention {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s1-2;}}. Even Obama's campaign spokesman in Virginia, Kevin Griffis, said that the release appeared not to

be a politically motivated effort to stop students from voting, but an effort of good-faith to convey state guidelines {{6 Lewin, Tamar 2008}}.

So far, it has been argued that it was not necessarily the voluntary registration system that affected youth turnout, but it was rather influenced by the variations of registration laws within the American registration system. However, both of these arguments focus on the registration system as a barrier for participation, and none of them explain fluctuations in the national youth turnout. The variation in registration deadlines explains variation in youth turnout among states, but it does not provide an explanation for fluctuations in youth turnout. Instead, the explanation for fluctuations might be attributed to measures taken to increase electoral participation through liberalization of registration laws.

### **The National Voter Registration Act**

The increase in electoral participation of young voters since 1996 could be an effect of liberalized registration laws in form of the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA). In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the NVRA into law as a measure to increase electoral participation in the US. During the signing, Clinton emphasized that the key to boost American turnout was through the reduction of barriers to register. He claimed, that: *“Voting should be about discerning the will of the majority, not about testing the administrative capacity of a citizen.”* {{45 Office of the Press Secretary 1993}} The passage of NVRA required states to implement four procedures that should lighten the registration process for the eligible voters. In effect from 1995, NVRA made it possible to register at the department of motor vehicles when applying for or renewing driver licenses. It also entailed registration at other public agencies as well as universal mail in registration and prohibit purging of registrants who failed to vote.

A study of NVRA’s impact on turnout determined that the electoral groups most affected by the NVRA’s procedures were the young people and the residentially mobile. These two groups overlap each other {{44 Highton, Benjamin /s80;}}, and thus it can be argued that the new registration methods of the NVRA have boosted turnout among young Americans. In 1992, less than 40 percent of Americans aged 23 to 27 had lived at the same address for more than two years. In 2004 and 2008, 27 percent of young voters were most likely to register at a

department of motor vehicles. The rest of the electorate were most likely to register at a town hall or county/government registration office {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s2;}}. Young voters also pointed at registration by mail, which also became possible with the NVRA, as the second most used form of registration while it only ranked fourth among adults {{17 Godsay, Surbhiand 2010/s4;}}.

When assessing the registration and turnout rate in 1996 and 2000, it is evident that the NVRA did not have the desired effect on the young electorate as Clinton had hoped. In 1996, the youth registration rate, 62 percent, was at the same level as in 1992, and the youth turnout rate decreased from 52 to 39.6 percent (figure 2). In 2000, the registration rate decreased to 55 percent, which actually was one percentage point below the registration rate of 1988, while the turnout rate marginally increased with 0.7 percentage points (Figure 2). Both registration and turnout rates did not increase until 2004 and 2008, which was nine to thirteen years after the implementation of NVRA. However, another study suggests that the proportion of individuals registered to vote was greater the longer a state had a motor voter program in place.

All things considered, there is evidence that the American registration systems do and do not influence the electoral participation of young Americans. First, the comparison with other registration systems revealed that other voluntary registration systems had turnout rates in line with the automatic registration systems. It signifies that voluntary registration does not necessarily depress turnout and therefore turnout cannot be explained with the type of registration system. Also, the issue of college addresses used for registration, do not explain turnout either, because turnout was highest among young people with higher education. Furthermore, the registration rates are always higher than the actual turnout rates, which indicate that the variables of impact are to be found between registration and Election Day.

On the other hand, young people point out registration laws as reasons not to register, and figures showed that turnout in states with liberalized registration law was higher than in states with tight registration laws. However, this only explains variations in turnout among states and not fluctuations in aggregate turnout from one election to another. It could be argued that the increase in 2004 was a delayed effect of the implementation of the NVRA, but it does not explain the high turnout in 1992. Also, it fails to explain why the registration rate remained the same in 1996 and decreased in 2000. It cannot be predicted how the rate of registration

and voter turnout would have been had it not been for NVRA. It would be necessary to observe the trends of turnout over a longer period of time before assessing if the increase could be linked to the NVRA.

In the end, with an exception of the NVRA, the American registration system has been a constant factor through the period of 1988 to 2008, which means it cannot explain fluctuations in turnout.

## The Electoral College

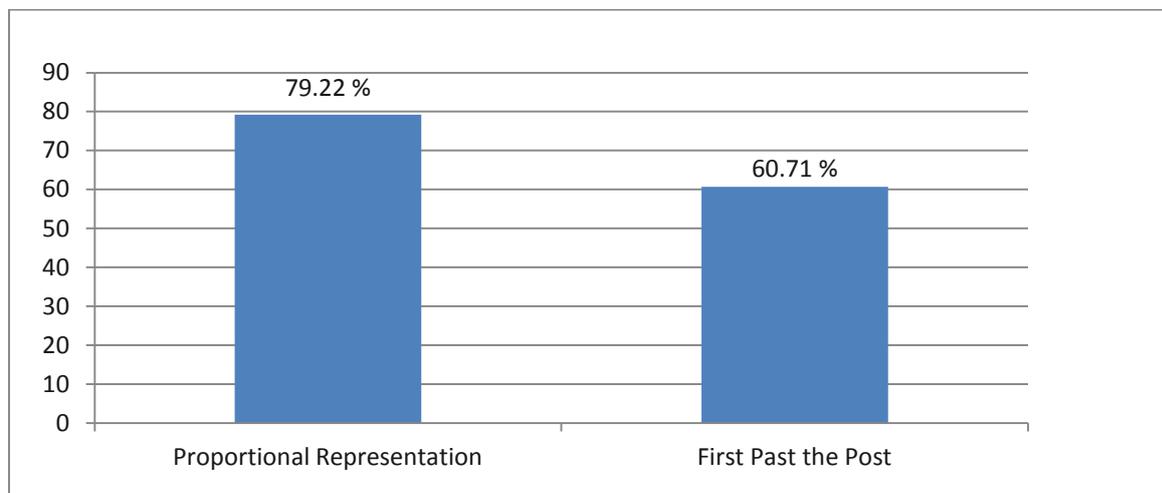
*The Electoral College is also an important factor in the examination of fluctuations in youth turnout. The Electoral College is the electoral rule that establish how citizens cast their votes, and how these votes are transformed into governmental power. The Electoral College has an indirect effect on turnout, because it can create a discouraging environment that might cause abstention. The reason for not voting can be individuals' attitudes towards the value of their vote, and the lack of campaigns' mobilization efforts {{39 Powell, G. Bingham /s18;}}.*

### The Effect of Electoral Systems

First, it is necessary to examine whether electoral systems in general affect turnout before considering a possible effect of the Electoral College on fluctuations in youth turnout. A potential relationship between the type of electoral system and the level of turnouts can be identified through an assessment of turnout and electoral systems across different nations. It will be a comparison of the plurality systems and proportional representation (PR) systems. Plurality systems form governments based on the preferences of the majority by using the plurality rules election. These systems translate votes into power through the “first past the post” principle. It means that the candidate who receives the majority of votes win the election. PR systems form governments that represent as many groups in society as possible. Governmental power is allocated to parties based on the proportional support of the electorate.

Figure 3 below illustrates the difference in mean turnout rates between the electoral systems in industrialized countries from 1986-2008. The chart shows that countries with PR systems experience higher turnout rates than the countries with plurality systems. The difference of 18.5 percentage points indicates that PR systems generate higher turnout rates than plurality systems. These findings suggest that plurality systems lowers turnout and thus electoral systems have an effect on turnout. Plurality systems appear to be a barrier for electoral participation, which can explain low turnout.

**Figure 3** Comparative Turnouts by Electoral Systems, 1986-2008



Source: Adapted from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Voter Turnout Base*, <http://www.idea.int/vt/viewdata.cfm>. Gans, Cutis, *Voter Turnout in the United States 1788-2008*, CQ Press (2011)

The effect of plurality systems can explain the low levels of youth turnout from 1988 to 2008. The effect is caused by voters' perception of "wasted votes", and underrepresentation of third parties. The issue of "wasted votes" is that a low probability of transforming a vote into governmental representation gives voters an impression of their vote being wasted. For instance, candidates from minor parties will often have difficulties in securing the majority of votes necessary to win the state or the presidency, and therefore would votes for him/her be perceived as wasted{{58 Burnham, Walter Dean 1987/s106;}}. In PR systems, the chances for wasted votes are minimal, because citizens' votes are likely to be translated into representation in government regardless of the party's size.

The plurality systems reinforce the wasted vote factor because it encourages two party systems. The electoral rules of plurality systems award large parties and constrain smaller parties. This results in an underrepresentation of third parties {{59 Blais, André /s79;}}. The underrepresentation of third parties increases the wasted vote factor because citizens then realize the difficulty of translating their votes for minor parties into governmental power. It means that when a voter's preferred candidate represents a party with a minimal chance to win it creates a minimal chance of translating the vote into power.

In the US, the Electoral College has created an electoral system which favors the two party system. This has created an underrepresentation of third parties and increased the wasted vote factor. In order to win the presidency a presidential candidate needs to win at least 270 out of the total 538 Electoral College Votes (ECVs). Each state, except Nebraska and Maine, allocate their share of ECVs through plurality elections, and this means that not only would it be difficult for a candidate from a minor party to receive enough votes to win a state's ECVs, but it would also be difficult to obtain the minimum of 270 ECVs. This makes Americans perceive a vote for such candidate as wasted. Instead, citizens can cast their ballot for the party perceived as most acceptable of the two major parties. However this explain why turnout is low compared to other systems, but not why youth turnout will decrease in one election and increase in another.

Although there is no indication of the Electoral College's impact on fluctuations in the aggregate youth turnout, it does not mean that the Electoral College has no effect on youth turnout at all. The wasted vote factor also applies to the states that are heavily dominated by one of the two major parties. If the Republican or Democratic Party is supported by the majority of a state's population, it can create low incentives to vote for members of both parties { {30 Cebula, Richard 2008/s54; } }. If one party is sure to receive the majority of votes needed to win the state's ECV, the result is perceived as a foregone conclusion. A foregone conclusion creates the perception of wasted votes. The wasted vote factor will apply to members of both parties and make them abstain. Members of the minority party will perceive the chances of the party's candidate to as minimal, and thus their vote would not make a difference. Members of the dominant party see that the party's candidate is going to win anyway, and therefore think that their vote is not needed.

The possibility for a non-wasted vote is greater in the states where the party dominance of the two parties is more or less equal. When competition is close between the two parties the likelihood of casting a decisive vote increases. This is also recognized by the candidates, who in an effort to mobilize citizens to vote for them allocate more campaign resources in the states with close competition. This means that states turnout level is correlated to the level of competition for a state's ECVs.

## Turnouts in Competitive and Non-Competitive States

The wasted vote factor and the two-party system indicate that the Electoral College causes variations in youth turnout between states. The close competition in some states can be a mobilization factor for the youth in these states. It can be suggested that the competition in some states could have increased the overall youth turnout. A CIRCLE report on states turnout rates in 2004 informs that youth voter participation was higher in competitive states than non-competitive states. In 2000, the turnout rate among young voters was 51 percent in the ten most contested states, while it was 38 percent in the other states. In 2004, this turnout gap widened with a turnout rate of 64.4 percent in the competitive states, and 47.6 percent in the rest of the country. The youth turnout in competitive states was only 1.7 percentage points below the average turnout for swing states. The non-competitive states experienced a youth turnout that was 11.3 percentage points below the average turnout for older voters. A comparison of states' turnout from 1972, when 18 year olds were first allowed to vote, to that of 2004 reveals the sharpest decrease in youth turnout was in non-competitive states. A study carried out by the Brookings institute claims that the difference in turnout is caused by the difference in mobilization efforts. It claims that young people participate when they are asked to do so {{60 Donovan, Carrie 2005}}.

The figures suggest that the level of competition is linked to the level of the youth's turnout across the states. Fluctuations in youth turnout on the national level could also be caused by change in composition of competitive states. If the number of competitive states varies from election to election, it could result in different turnout levels from election to election. However, it could be unreliable to credit the competition in a selection of states to the increase in the aggregate youth turnout.

On the other hand, candidates will allocate a large share of resources in competitive states in every election, which signify that competitive states do not explain fluctuations in youth turnout. There is inconsistency between the fluctuations in aggregate youth turnout and the high youth turnout in competitive states. In 2000 the aggregate youth turnout did not increase despite the differences in youth turnout in competitive and non-competitive states. In 2004, the gap in turnout rates between the states widened, and the overall youth turnout increased.

The differences in the aggregate turnout despite the constant gaps between competitive and non-competitive states indicate that the Electoral College do not affect youth turnout.

In the end, the Electoral College is a factor that explains why the turnout in the U.S. is low compared to other nations, and why turnout can vary between states. Despite these effects, the Electoral College does not cause fluctuations in the aggregate youth turnout. Even though, it explains low turnout among nations, it cannot be the reason for the decreases in youth turnout experienced within the period of 1988 to 2008. The Electoral College is a constant factor, which means that the rules of how to cast and translate votes into governmental power has not changed, and thus, it cannot explain variations in turnout.

## **The Economy**

*The economy can explain fluctuations in youth turnout, because voters are rational individuals who are mobilized to vote if participation will maximize their personal utility. The benefits from participation must exceed the cost associated with voting. Young voters are pocketbook voters, who will be mobilized to vote by their own economic situation. This means that there is a strong correlation between economic indicators which affect the youth's pocketbooks and fluctuation in youth turnout.*

An indicator that affects the pocketbook is the youth unemployment rate. When unemployment is low young people will be less mobilized to vote. High unemployment rates will mobilize young Americans to vote as an attempt to change their economic situation and satisfy their own economic interest. This is evident in the strong correlation between the fluctuations in the youth unemployment rate and the youth turnout rate. Unemployment is important to young voters, not only because of the direct effect it has on their economic situation, but also because often the youth is entering the job market for the first time. Young people lack the level of work experience obtained by the rest of the public, and therefore the level of unemployment signify the chance for getting a job and earn money.

### **The Economy as a Mobilization Factor**

The economy's impact on youth turnout can be examined through three different arguments. The economy mobilizes, demobilizes or has no impact on electoral participation. The first argument suggests that economic adversity leads to an increase in electoral participation in form of mobilizing citizens to vote as a response to their economic situation. This means that fluctuations in turnout can be attributed to the mobilization of citizens' during times with bad economy and the demobilization when the economy is considered good. When people are subject to economic pressure caused by inflation, recession, unemployment etc. they might turn to political action and thereby increase turnout {{25 Rosenstone, Steven 1982/s25;}}.

This means that eligible voters who are experiencing economic duress believe that legislators are accountable for their hardship, and believe that changes in legislators will improve their financial circumstances. Such change is achieved through electoral participation, and therefore youth turnout will increase during economic hardships. This form of participation is known as negative voting, which means voters are more motivated to punish the legislators they perceive are accountable for the poor economy than to reward legislators who managed to generate a strong economy. In other words, voters who are experiencing economic constraint are more motivated to vote than citizens without economic problems. Negative voting is used to show dissatisfaction or punish those they perceive are the reason for their economic adversity, and often involve a vote for the incumbent's challenger {{25 Rosenstone, Steven J. 1982}}.

The second argument is contradictory to the first argument, and claims that economic hardship depresses voter turnout rather than boosts it. According to this, fluctuations in turnout occur in form of demobilization to vote during economic hard times, and mobilization during economic good times. The point of view is that economic troubles cause citizens to be preoccupied with personal economic wellbeing, and therefore they withdraw from external matters such as politics. The reason for such withdrawal is that financially strained citizens have reduced capacity to participate in elections, because they allocate more time to make ends meet, hold on to or find a job etc. {{25 Rosenstone, Steven J. 1982}}.

A study on turnout among three different problems groups argues that economic adversity inhibit turnout by directing attention toward the individual self and away from the connection between self and society. *“Citizens whose chief worry is making ends meet, holding onto their job, or finding one, may well find any interest they might have in the broad affairs of politics deflected to coping with finding a way to deal now, or as soon as possible, with the most immediate and pressing of 'bread-and-butter' problems”* {{27 Brody, Richard 1977/s346;}}. It would mean that citizens would be demobilized to vote during times of economic hardship. Hence, when unemployment rate are high and the economic growth slumps, people will refrain from voting, because their attention is directed towards their personal economic problems.

The third argument disputes both of the other arguments, and advocates that economic duress has no effect on voter participation. This suggests that the economy do not explain fluctuations in youth turnout. Political scientists, Donald R. Kinder and D. Roderick Kiewiet have examined whether political action is motivated by issues that immediately and tangibly influence voters' personal life especially in form of the relationship between economic conditions and election outcomes. Based on an analysis of citizens' financial circumstances in relation to congressional elections, they conclude that personal economic grievance is not politically salient in national elections. The study reveals that eligible voters, who were experiencing a negative change in their financial circumstances, were not likely to punish the incumbent party for their personal misfortune. Instead, voters place the responsibility on themselves or the immediate environment rather than linking it to political attitudes and preferences {{28 Kinder, Donald 1979}}. This argument tells that turnout is not affected by neither good nor bad economic times, because voters tend to blame themselves or the surrounding environment.

In order to establish the economy's effect on youth turnout, it is necessary to assess the three arguments through an examination of the relationship between economic indicators and the youth turnout rate. The examination will focus on the first two arguments to evaluate if the economy is a variable to youth turnout. The importance of economic indicators to voter turnout depends on how voters evaluate the state of the economy, and how voting generates benefits that maximize their preferences.

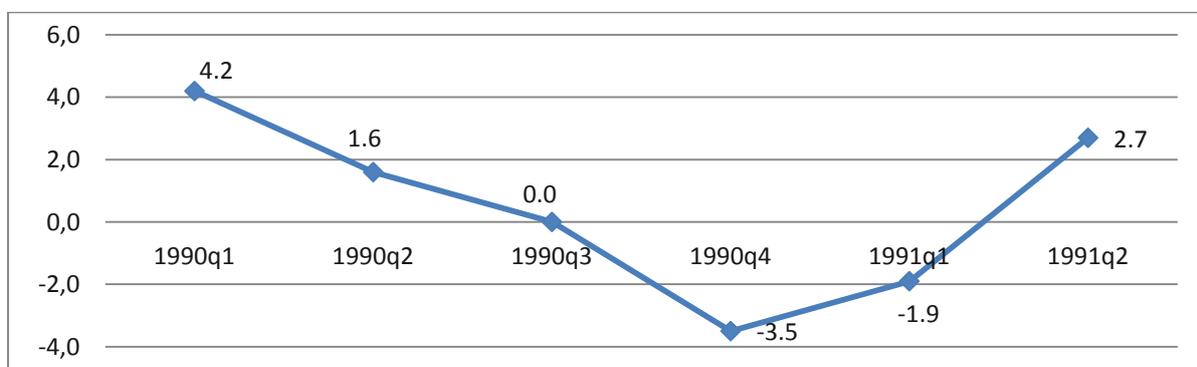
Voters can be "pocketbook voters", which means that they vote based on personal economic predicaments without regards to the state of the national economy. It is the voter's perception of immediate family's economic situation that determines whether the voter believes that the economy is doing good or bad. Pocketbook voters perceived benefits as something that will improve their own economic situation {{55 Markus, Gregory B. /s138;}}. Voters, who are "sociotropic voters", do not merely evaluate their own economic situation, but also consider the state of the national economy when voting. It does not entail a full evaluation of macroeconomic policies, but they have a rough idea of the nation's economic health. The benefits for sociotropic voters is not just to ensure their own financial wellbeing, but also the well being of the nation's economy {{55 Markus, Gregory B. /s138;}}.

To assess which of the three arguments explain fluctuations in youth turnout, the economic indicators of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and unemployment will be examined. GDP measures the state of the national economy, which is an important factor to sociotropic voters, whereas unemployment is something that directly can affect voters' pocketbooks through loss of job and income.

### Economic Growth and Sociotropic Voters

If young Americans are sociotropic voters, they would be either mobilized or demobilized to vote based on the current state of the national economy. This means that there should be a relationship between the growth rate and the youth turnout rate. According to the arguments above, young people are either mobilized or demobilized to vote if there were negative changes in GDP coinciding with elections. Youth turnout rate should either increase or decline when the US experiences a recession or economic downturn. The general definition for a recession is when the GDP is declining for two or more quarters. However, in the US, the private non-partisan group The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) defines a recession as “a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales” {{50 Public Information Office, The National Bureau of Economic Research 2010}}.

**Figure 4** Percent Change in U.S GDP (based on chained 2005 dollars), 1990q1-1992q2

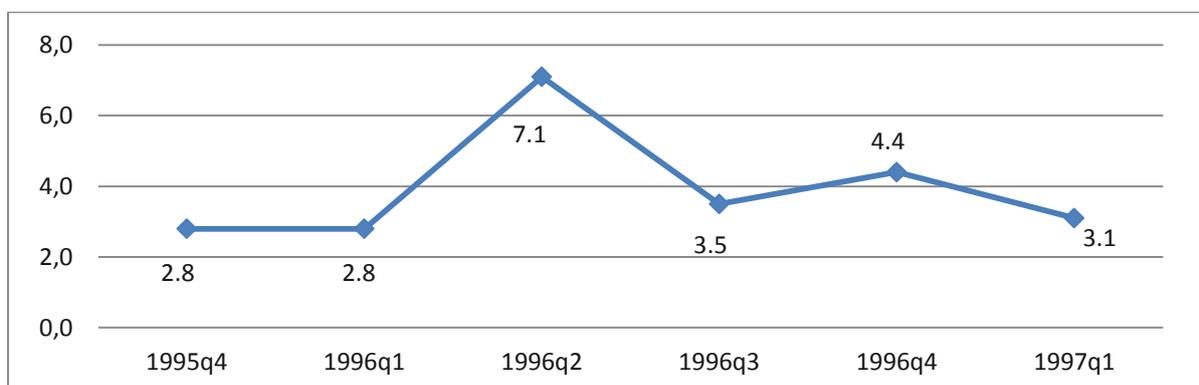


Source: Adapted from The Bureau of Economic Analysis, *National Economic Accounts - Percent Change From Preceding Period*, (8 March 2012), <http://www.bea.gov/national/index.htm>

Figure 4 to 7 demonstrate when the U.S. experienced recessions, and if recessions occurred in years of elections. If there was a recession during an election it could explain either why the youth voted or abstained. From July 1990 to March 1991, there was a recession in the U.S. The growth rate was minus 3.5 percent in the fourth quarter of 1990 and minus 1.9 percent in first quarter of 1991 (Figure 4). This recession could have been a motivating factor for young people to vote, and thus created the large increase in turnout from 1988 to 1992. In January 1992, 76 percent of the general public named the economy as the most important problem facing the nation. 87 percent defined the state of the economy as only fair or poor, and 63 percent claimed that the state of their personal finances was fair or poor. 79 percent stated that the local job situation was difficult, and 58 percent said they could not afford to buy the things they wanted {{92 The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2008}}.

The economy was also recognized as an important factor in Clinton’s presidential campaign. The campaign used phrases such as *“It’s the Economy, Stupid”* {{29 Fair, Ray C. 2002/s7;}} and defined the following economic upturn as *“a jobless recover”* {{49 Andrews, Edmund L. 2008}} in an attempt to mobilize voters. The high turnout among young Americans and the election of Clinton as president indicate that the economy did mobilize voters to turn up at the polls. Citizens could perceive voting in 1992 as an act where benefits exceeded the cost, because the chance for a new president could improve the voters’ preferences in form of economic growth. In addition, the low turnout in 1996 could be caused by a better state of the economy.

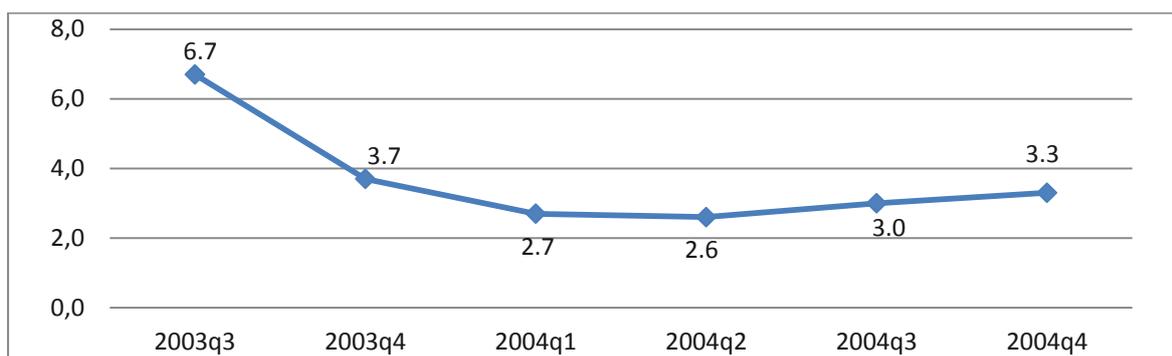
**Figure 5** Percent Change in U.S GDP (based on chained 2005 dollars), 1995q4-1997q1



Source: Adapted from The Bureau of Economic Analysis, *National Economic Accounts - Percent Change From Preceding Period*, (8 March 2012), <http://www.bea.gov/national/index.htm>

During the second quarter of 1996 the growth rate peaked to 7.1 percent, and when it declined there was still a higher growth rate than the previous quarters. In the fourth quarter of 1996 the growth rate was 4.4 percent (Figure 5) which suggests a healthy economy, and that young voters were not mobilized to vote. When the state of the economy is perceived as good, the benefits of voting do not exceed the cost because a possible change of president would not be necessary. These examples demonstrate that the economy is a mobilizing factor. More specific, young people go to the polls if the US is experiencing an economic downturn, and they will abstain from voting when the growth rate is considered healthy.

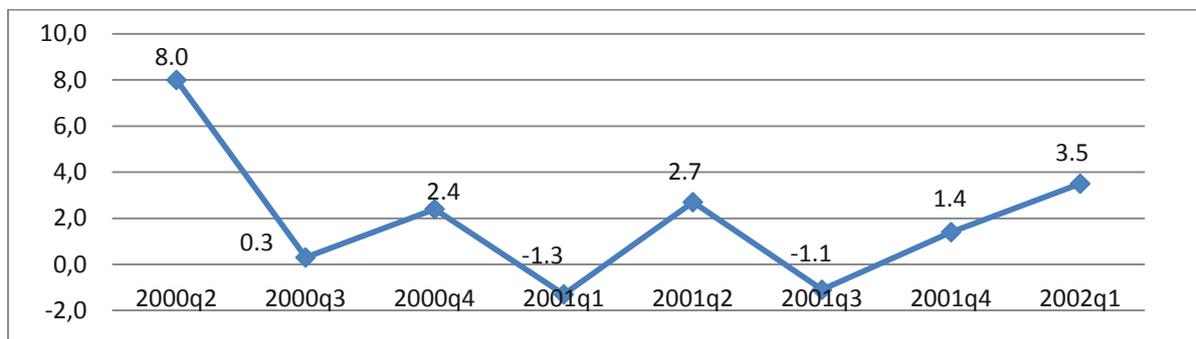
**Figure 6** Percent Change in U.S GDP (based on chained 2005 dollars), 2003q3-2004q4



Source: Adapted from The Bureau of Economic Analysis, *National Economic Accounts - Percent Change From Preceding Period*, (8 March 2012), <http://www.bea.gov/national/index.htm>

On the other hand, it would not be right to attribute the fluctuations in youth turnout to the state of the national economy. The economy had begun recovering by November 1992 (Figure 4), and therefore it would not be accurate to ascribe the high turnout of 1992 to the recession. This is also evident in the 2004 election where turnout again increased. Figure 6 shows that the American growth rate had slowed down in 2004, but the country was not going through a recession or an economic downturn like in 2001 (Figure 7). Depending on the definition of recession, it was not quite a recession in 2001, because the economy contracted in two disjointed quarters. In the first quarter of 2001, the growth rate was minus 1.3 percent, which was followed by an increase of 4 percentage points, and then it once again slumped to minus 1.1 percent in the third quarter (Figure 7).

**Figure 7** Percent Change in U.S GDP (based on chained 2005 dollars), 2000q2-2002q1



Source: Adapted from The Bureau of Economic Analysis, *National Economic Accounts - Percent Change From Preceding Period*, (8 March 2012), <http://www.bea.gov/national/index.htm>

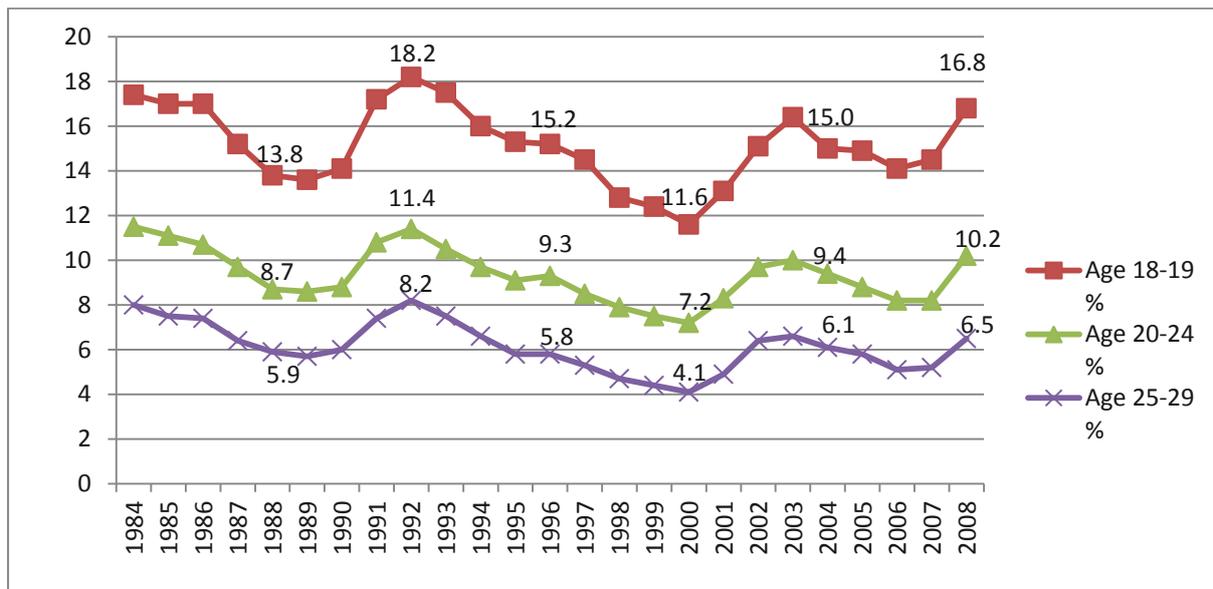
Given that the economic downturns were in 2001 and not 2004, it indicates again that the state of the economy could not be the mobilizing factor, and thereby not explain youth turnout. The public's perception of the state of the economy was also more leveled in 2004. Approximately, 60 percent defined the economy as doing only fair or poor, while about 40 percent perceived it as good or excellent. This division was much larger the year before with 82 percent perceiving the state of the economy as only fair or poor, and 18 percent defining it as good or excellent { {92 The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2008} }. Also, the reelection of President Bush demonstrates that the high turnout was not a form of negative voting. None of the examples suggest that economic downturn is a demobilizing factor for voter turnout. However the lack of a strong correlation between the economic growth rate and the level of youth turnout illustrates that the economy does not affect electoral participation and that young voters are not sociotropic voters.

### **Unemployment and Pocketbook Voters**

Hence, if young Americans are not sociotropic voters, and if the economy either mobilizes or demobilizes voters, it indicates that young voters are pocketbook voters. Instead of a correlation between GDP's growth rate and the youth turnout rate, fluctuations in youth turnout should be caused by a possible relationship between the rate of unemployment and the rate turnout among young people. Unemployment is defined as a lagging indicator, because

changes in the unemployment rate are a reaction to the state of the national economy. Negative changes in GDP in form of economic downturn or recession are most likely to affect the unemployment rate. After an economic downturn, unemployment often increases, and can remain high long after the economy recovers. This was the case with the recession in 1990 to 1991 as well as the economic downturn in 2001. Unemployment can be the variable that affected the youth turnout during both elections. Despite the economy’s recovery before the 1992 election the unemployment still increased, which was the reason for Clinton’s reference to a “*jobless recovery*” (Andrews, Edmund L. 2008). In the fourth quarter of 2001, the economy recovered, but the unemployment rate steadily increased after the economic downturn in 2001 until 2003.

**Figure 8** The National Youth Unemployment Rate in the U.S., 1984-2008

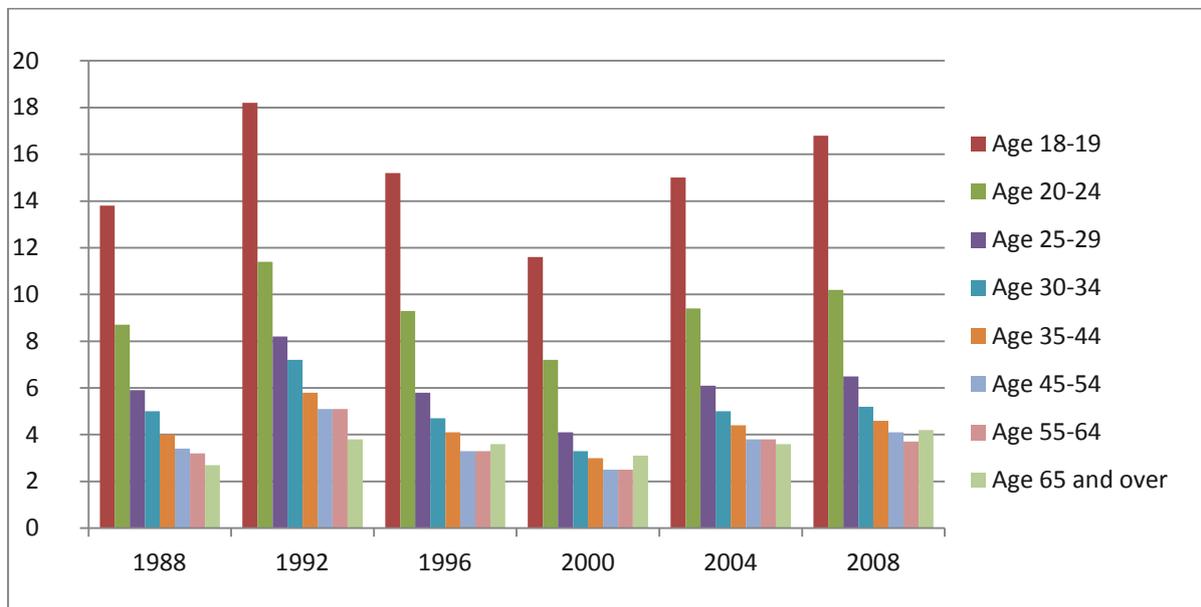


Source: Adapted from Labor Force Statistics (Current Population Survey), *Demographics (CPS) – Age*, (8 March 2012), <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/querytool.jsp?survey=ln>

Figure 8 illustrates that there is strong correlation between the variations in youth unemployment and fluctuations in youth turnout. All three age groups within the youth population were all experiencing high unemployment during the 1992 election and again in 2004. The high youth turnout and high unemployment rates in both elections indicate that the economy in the form of economic adversity is a mobilizing factor for electoral participation among young Americans. More specific, the youth will be mobilized to participate on Election Day

if there are high unemployment rates during elections. During high unemployment, the benefits of electoral participation are to satisfy the preferences of employment by voting for a new president in the oval office who hopefully will reverse the situation. In addition, young people will refrain from electoral participation when unemployment rates are low. In this case, the benefits of voting will not necessarily outweigh the cost, because it is likely the voters' preferences are already satisfied. This is evident from the low unemployment rates in 1996 and the further slump in 2000 compared to the decline in turnout in 1996 and the continued low turnout in 2000.

**Figure 9** The National Unemployment Rate by Age in the U.S.



Source: Adapted from Labor Force Statistics (Current Population Survey), *Demographics (CPS) – Age*, (8 March 2012), <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/querytool.jsp?survey=ln>

Unemployment motivates electoral participation among the youth, and cause variations in turnout because young people are entering the job market for the first time. Also, figure 9 below reveals that despite the level of unemployment, the youth unemployment rate is higher than in any other age groups. During rise in unemployment young people are the first to lose out either due to seniority, “first in, first out” or lack of experience. In comparison to other age groups with longer association with the job market, young people are relatively inexperienced and depending on their educational background low-skilled. If unemployment is on the rise, the competition on the job market increases, and the jobs pass by the youth.

This was also stated by the economist and director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, Andrew Sum, in an interview regarding the recession in 2008; “*We have a monster jobs problem, and young people are the biggest losers*” {{51 Associated Press 2011}}.

Again, there is no evidence that economic adversity demobilizes voters. However, the strong correlation between the level of unemployment and the level of turnout indicates that economic variables that affects the voters’ pocketbooks also affects turnout. In other words, young voters do not evaluate the state of national economy during elections, but assess their own financial wellbeing. If young voters experience economic strain on their pocketbooks they will act and go to the polls in an attempt to maximize their own economic interests. Even though there was no evidence of a direct relationship between economic growth and youth turnout. The growth rate has an effect on the unemployment rate, which in the end means that the economy affects fluctuations in youth turnout.

## The Culture War

*Besides the economic factor, fluctuations in youth turnout can also be explained by the phenomenon of culture war. Electoral participation is not just an act of electing lawmakers and administrators, but has also become an act of embracing or rejecting the symbols of national life. The intensity of culture war differs from election to elections along with the voters' perception of the candidates' position on social issues. The high turnout among young people in 1992 and 2004 can be attributed to the perceived ideological distance between the candidates.*

Figures reveal that the majority of young Americans vote democratic and have more liberal attitudes towards social issues. This means that they are likely to take the liberal position on social issues in the culture war. The Democratic Party is often associated with the liberal ideology, and therefore will the youth vote for the democratic candidate. Due to the youth's tendency to already vote democratic, the turnout of young people during culture war is more likely to not be a pull towards the democratic candidates, but rather a push away from the republican candidates.

It is important to examine the culture war's effect on youth turnout, because it has emerged as a factor in the presidential elections. The culture war unfolds between different systems of society, which have different moral understanding of what is right and wrong according to their perception of the ideal America. This entails different positions on social issues such as gay rights and abortion. The intensity of culture war and competing visions increase with the level of office up for election, but it is not equally represented in every election {{63 Hunter, James Davison 1991}}. This suggests that there is a possible link between the intensity of cultural war in an election and the level of turnout.

The culture war is an arrangement of the American Public that sparks significant tension and conflict. It is a conflict between individuals who favor traditional or conservative values and individuals who favor progressive or liberal values. The traditional values are based on the cultural conservatism and the heritage of Judeo-Christian, whereas the progressive values are an association with modern liberalism and the assumption of the evolving of moral understand along with contemporary life. Elections can be perceived as enactments of culture war itself, which are defined within the contemporary moral context where candidates represent a

certain system of moral understanding {{63 Hunter, James Davison 1991}}. The term cultural war has been linked to the political agenda since the sexual revolution in the 1960s, but it was really embraced in the 1992 election. At the Republican National Convention in 1992, Pat Buchanan declared the nation to be at war. It was not a war under the general term of hostile conflict between two nations, but a war that Buchanan defined as a religious and cultural war for the soul of America {{61 Stanley, Timothy 2012}}.

Before assessing the culture wars influence on youth turnout, it is necessary to establish the ideology associated with the Democratic and Republican Party and then identify the tie of traditionalists and progressives with the two parties. In 2010, 26 percent of the Democrats described the party as very liberal, 32 percent as liberal and 26 percent as moderate. Actually, Democrats tended to view their party as more liberal than their own ideological assessment {{84 Pew 2011}}. Liberalism refers to the idea of the government's role as provider of social justice and equal opportunities to all citizens. It is not to be confused with socialism, given liberals still support private ownership of corporations. The American liberalism has throughout time tied itself to the social movements, and it is often assigned the supportive role in issues such as abortion, homosexuality and healthcare {{33 Ashbee,Edward 2004}}. In the culture war, the progressives share the same views as the Democratic Party and the liberal ideology {{64 Ashbee, Edward 2004}}.

In 2010, 18 percent of Republicans saw the party as very conservative, 38 percent as conservative, and 26 percent as moderate. Also, Republicans tended to perceive their party as more conservative than their own ideological assessment {{84 Pew 2011}}. Conservatism represents American traditions and values and is built on the belief of liberty, limited government and self-reliance. Most conservatives attach importance to moral traditionalism, which means association to Judeo-Christian society and respect for biblical values. Also, it involves a belief in a natural character of a living with traditional relationship between opposite sex and specific gender roles. Some conservatives place the responsibility to ensure this character of living to the government through e.g. legislation banning gay marriages, while others lean towards a moral persuasion {{33 Ashbee,Edward 2004}}. Traditionalist associates their views on values with the Republican Party and conservatism {{64 Ashbee, Edward 2004}}.

## **Difference Between Candidates**

The increase in turnout in 1992 and 2004 could have been triggered by the culture war and voters' perception of ideological distance between candidates. The downturn in 1996 could have been caused by a lack of culture war and voter indifference. The culture war represents different attitudes towards social issues, which is important to turnout because of the differences in candidates' position on social issues. The differences between candidates affect turnout due to the expectations of the benefits gained from the election of one candidate compared to the election of another candidate. The expected benefits associated with the candidates differs from voter to voter, and depends on the candidates' party platform, stand on issues and character. For example, a voter will calculate whether he or she will benefit from voting for candidate A who favors gay marriage or for candidate B who opposes. Voters will be mobilized to vote if the difference between the two candidates is perceived as significant. The participation is about ensuring the victory of the candidate who maximizes the voter's preferences.

This form of mobilization is evident in a study of relationship between voter turnout and vote choice. The study revealed that 13 to 14 percent of the respondents abstained due to indifference. This indicates that the level of the perceived policy distance between candidates is relevant to voters decision to participate or not (Adams, James /s74;). The more diverse the voters perceive the candidates, the more voter turnout will increase. Additionally, voter turnout is likely to decrease if voters recognize the ideological differences between candidates to be minimal. Voters' perception of minimal ideological differences between candidates makes voters indifferent to who win the presidency, and therefore can participation not justify the cost of voting (Adams, James /s68;). This means that fluctuations in youth turnout occur when young voters abstain from indifference or participate when the difference between the candidates are perceived as significant.

It can be questioned how the perceived differences can create fluctuations in youth turnout when the majority of young Americans are predicted to vote Democratic anyway. However, it can be argued that the movement of young voters is not a pull towards the Democrats, but rather a push away from the Republicans. In the media, it has been suggested that the Republican Party tend to turnoff young voters, because the party does not speak to them. For one thing, it is because the party has hitched its wagon to culture war, and for many young people

the culture war has been settled. In other words, young people do not know why issues such as gay marriage are a problem, because it is something they have grown up with {{66 Waldman, Paul 2007}}.

An example of the push from the Republicans towards the Democrats is 19 year-old Colleen Wilson. Despite identifying herself as Republican, she stated: *"I may vote Obama"*. She, among many other young people, tends to be more liberal when it comes to social issues, and has been turned off by the Republicans' position in the culture war. She said: *"It scares me how extreme they are on social conservatism...It wasn't that they didn't believe in gay marriage. It was how vicious and closed minded they were"* {{82 Zengerle, Patricia 2012}}. This means that the increased turnout in 1992 and 2004 as well as the decrease in 1996 could be determined by the intensity of the culture war and the young voters' perception of the candidates' positions on social issues. The more distant the youth perceives the position of the Republican candidate, the more likely they are to turn out and vote for the Democratic candidate.

### **Party Identification, Ideology and Political Attitudes**

In order to examine whether candidate differences and the culture war have affected the youth turnout, it is essential to establish if young people are predominantly democratic. Exit polls from 2008 confirm that the majority of young people, 45 percent, identified themselves as Democratic, and 26 percent identified themselves as Republican {{70 Keeter, Scott 2008}}. On the other hand, the party gap of 19 percent was a huge increase compared to the last three elections. In 2004, the party gap was only two percent, and in 2000, it was just one percent {{70 Keeter, Scott 2008}}. The small gap in party identification does not establish young voters as Democratic. However, figures of the youth's vote distribution between candidates from 1988 to 2008 indicate otherwise. In every election, with the exception of 2000, the majority of young voters have voted Democratic, and therefore young voters can be considered as predominantly Democratic.

**Table 1** Support for Presidential Candidates Among Voters Age 18-29

<b>1988:</b>	George H. W. Bush	52%
	Michael Dukakis	47%
<b>1992:</b>	Bill Clinton	43%
	George H. W. Bush	34%
	Ross Perot	22%
<b>1996:</b>	Bill Clinton	53%
	Robert Dole	34%
	Ross Perot	10%
<b>2000:</b>	Georg W. Bush	46 %
	Al Gore	48 %
	Ralph Nader	5%
<b>2004<sup>4</sup>:</b>	Georg W. Bush	45 %
	John Kerry	54%
<b>2008:</b>	Barack Obama	66%
	John McCain	31%

Source: Adapted from Falcone, Michael. *Youth Turnout Up by 2 Million From 2004*, New York Times (5 November 2008), <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/youth-turnout-up-by-2-million-from-2004/?scp=7&sq=obama%202008%20turnout&st=cse>

The New York Times/CBS News Poll, *The Electorate: A Political Portrait*, (17 April 2012), [http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2004/11/06/weekinreview/20041107\\_ELECTORATE\\_CHART.html](http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2004/11/06/weekinreview/20041107_ELECTORATE_CHART.html)

Furthermore, it is also needed to establish whether young people are liberal or not. In 2008, a third of young voters, 32 percent, identified themselves as liberal. It is not enough to establish them as predominant liberal, but it exceeded the 26 percent of young Americans who were likely to identify as conservative. The older age cohort of 45 to 64 was more likely to indentify as conservatives, 36 percent, as opposed to liberal, 19 percent. The youth are about as likely as the general electorate to describe themselves as moderate with 42 percent of their age group compared to 45 percent of the 45 to 64 years old {{70 Keeter, Scott 2008}}. Among the young people who identified themselves as Republicans, 62 percent described their political view as conservative, while only seven percent described it as liberal. Among

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<sup>4</sup> Candidate Ralph Nader is not mentioned in the table because he did not receive a significant share of the youth's votes.

the young Democrats, 42 percent called themselves liberal, 21 stated to be conservative, while 34 percent saw themselves as moderate. This was the overall tendency of all republicans and democrats {{83 Horowitz, Juliana 2008}}.

The culture war becomes significant to youth turnout, because even though the majority of young Americans might identify themselves as moderate, they are distinctly more liberal in their views regarding policy questions. It indicates that the conservative positions of Republican candidates can become a mobilization factor for young voters. In 2008, 69 percent of young Americans favored an expanded role for government, and believed that government should do more to solve problems. 27 percent of the youth thought government did too much and should leave more responsibility to businesses and individuals. The rest of the electorate was less divided by this topic. 46 percent of Americans age 45 to 64 thought government should do more, and 49 percent believed it did too much. Also, the war in Iraq illustrated the difference between the youth and the rest of the public. 77 percent of the youth disapproved of the war in Iraq compared to 58 percent of those aged 45 to 64 {{70 Keeter, Scott 2008}}.

In 2004, the youth was not as divided on the role of the government, but their view was still a bit more liberal than the rest of the public. In 2004, 56 percent of young voters thought government ought to do more, compared to 46 percent of all voters. This was also evident regarding the issue of same-sex marriage. 41 percent of 18 to 29 years old claimed that it should be allowed, while only 25 percent of all voters shared this opinion {{71 Elrod, Brent 2004}}. In 1994, the majority of young Americans, 56 percent, favored gays could serve openly in the military while 43 percent opposed. These figures did not differ much from the age cohort of 30 to 49, however Americans aged 50 to 64 favored with 47 percent, and opposed with 50 percent. The gap was bigger to the voters over 60, who opposed by 50 percent and favored by 41 percent {{81 Pew 2012}}.

The distinction in attitudes between the youth and the rest of the electorate is caused by the racial and ethnic diversity of young people as well as their more secular attitude towards religious orientation. This does not only make them lean more Democratic, but it also inclines them to describe themselves as liberal politically. In 2008, the youth group consisted of 62 percent whites, 18 percent African Americans and 14 percent Hispanics. The age cohort of 45 to 64 consisted of 79 percent whites, 11 percent African Americans and 6 percent Hispanics. The diversity across age groups was also evident in religion orientation. More young Americans were not affiliated with a religious tradition, 16 percent, compared to people aged 45 to

64, 12 percent. Among those who did affiliated with a religious tradition, only a third of young Americans attended religious services regularly compared to 40 percent of 45 to 64 years old {{70 Keeter, Scott 2008}}.

### **Moral Values and Social Issues in Elections**

All the figures above illustrate young people to be predominantly democratic as well as having liberal attitudes towards policy issues<sup>5</sup>. This signifies that the electoral participation of young voters can be affected by the candidates' positions on social issues. However, it is necessary to establish if moral values and social issues were important in the 1992 and 2004 elections. In 2004, exit polls showed a mixed picture of the importance of moral values. The exit poll with a fixed list of responses demonstrated that 27 percent believed moral values were the most important issue. On the other hand, exit poll with open-end questions reduced the importance of moral values to 14 percent {{72 Pew 2004}}.

It can be questioned which results to emphasize in the examination of fluctuations in turnout. First of all, ABC's Director of Polling, Gary Langer, claims that moral issues should not be compared with other issues, given they are more about personal characteristic than political judgment. Professor of sociology Howard Schuman, argues that it should be considered in polls on elections issues, because it represents words that people consider meaningful, and that makes it important to people's vote. Second, Langer argues that polls with open-end questions provide a more genuine reflection than fixed lists. According to Schuman, open-end questions are subject to "salience effect". In other words, people who are forced to come up with a response on their own tend to be influenced by the recent information offered by television or other news sources. He concludes that if a fixed list includes all the main issues that a respondent probably would consider, it provides a more even playing field. Senior Gallup Poll Editor, David W. Moore, supported Schuman's argument, and has claimed that focus on moral values is justified {{73 Moore, David W. 2004}}.

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<sup>5</sup> The argument is only supported by few figures from the 1990s, however the distribution of the youth's votes among the candidates as well as their position to homosexuals in the military show the same tendency as the figures from 2004 and 2008.

## Homosexuality

In both 2004 and 1992 the issue of homosexuality was important, which can explain why young Americans were more mobilized to vote in these elections compared to others. In 2004, among the 27 percent from the fixed list exit poll, 29 percent found gay marriage to be important to their vote {{72 Pew 2004}}. The issue of homosexuality is one of the few issues, with the exception of abortion, that generates raw emotions. It is an issue due to the struggle of defining the absolute family. Homosexuality challenges the traditional conservative assumption of the ideal family life. Traditionalists perceive it as a perversion of the natural and social order {{63 Hunter, James Davison 1991/s188-192;}}.

Especially the legal rights of gay marriage have intensified in the culture war. The fight of homosexuals to obtain the same advantages as heterosexual couples has made the issue of same-sex marriage emerge as a national issue. In 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled the existing state law on banning gay marriage as unconstitutional unless compelling reasons for such discrimination was presented. Two years later, Utah's Governor Mike Levitt signed the first state Defense of Marriage statute, which meant that Utah no longer had to acknowledge out-of-state marriages if it violated state public policy. In 1996, the issue of gay marriage accumulated when Clinton signed the federal Defense of Marriage Act. The act defined marriage as a union of one man and one woman, and it stipulated that states could not be forced to acknowledge out-of-state gay marriages.

By the end of the 1990s and beginning of the millennium, same-sex marriage became an issue involving state courts and legislature. In Alaska, the issue of gay marriage was taken out of the courts, and instead it was prohibited with an amendment to the state constitution. Massachusetts incorporated the ruling of their supreme court, and legalized same-sex unions. By 2004, only four states had banned gay marriage by constitutional amendments. In the 2004 presidential election, thirteen states also had to vote on whether or not to amend their state constitution to ban gay marriage and/or civil unions {{77 Pew 2009; 76 Pew 2008}}.

The referendum on gay marriage and the issue's importance in the 2004 election give incentive to examine whether the issue of same-sex marriage could have contributed to the election's large increase in youth turnout. In August 2004, 38 percent of young voters said that gay marriage was important to their vote, 39 percent said not very important while 22 said

not at all {{86 Pew 2004}}. In February 2004, 32 percent of young voters strongly opposed gay marriage, but despite this number the youth was the lowest ranked age cohort in the opposition. Among those age 30 to 49, 38 percent strongly opposed, age 50 to 62, 45 percent, 65 and above, 58 percent {{87 Pew 2006}}.

The figures illustrate that the youth found the issue important, and that they had a much more liberal attitude towards it. It means that young people could have been mobilized to vote, because they were repelled by the conservative position of the Republican Party and Bush . In February 2004, Bush announced his support for the ban on same-sex marriage through federal constitutional amendment. He stated that such amendment was a necessary act to protect marriage in the U.S as well as the meaning of marriage. He claimed that attempts to redefine marriages could have serious consequences throughout the nation {{75 Cable News Network (CNN) 2004}}. He stated: *"We will not stand for judges who undermine democracy by legislating from the bench and try to remake America by court order."* {{90 The Republican Party 2004}}.

The Republican Party Platform of 2004 supported Bush's call for a constitutional amendment to protect marriage. It stressed that marriage was a unique and special union between a man and a woman, and that it was the only right environment for raising a child {{90 The Republican Party 2004}}. The Democratic Party Platform repudiated Bush's effort to politicize homosexuality, and claimed that the party believed the issue of marriage should continually be decided at state and not national level. The party announced support for the inclusion of homosexual families in the life of America, and that they should received same benefits and rights as every American family {{91 The Democratic Party 2004}}.

The link between the referendum and turnout should be evident in the turnout rates between states with and without the referendum on the ballot. Citizens of the thirteen states could have been mobilized to vote as an act of either embracing or rejecting the idea of gay marriage. Youth turnout<sup>6</sup> did increase in the states that vote on the referendum. The increase in percentage points was eight in Oregon, one in Arkansas, 13 in Georgia, 22 in Kentucky, 17 in Michigan, eight in Mississippi, seven in Oklahoma, 18 in Ohio, and 11 Utah Montana{{60

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<sup>6</sup> The data available on youth turnout in 2004 by states only include people of age 18 to 25. Not all of the states who voted on the referendum is included in this example. This is because of no precise data for youth turnout in the remaining states, because sample sizes were too small to estimate a proper turnout rate.

Donovan, Carrie 2005/s3;}}. This was an average increase of 11.67 percentage points, and could be credited to the issue of gay marriage.

However, youth turnout also increased in states without the anti-gay marriage referendum on the ballot. E.g., the percentage point increase in other states was 18 in Colorado, 18 in Arizona, 17 in New Jersey, 12 in New York etc {{60 Donovan, Carrie 2005/s3;}}. These increases demonstrate that the high increase in youth turnout among the states not necessarily can be ascribed to the issue of gay marriage. On the other hand, the increase in youth turnout in the remaining states could have been an effect of the exposure to the issue of gay marriage in the other states. The youth could have turned out to vote to show their general position on the issue. Given the increase in turnout in many states, and the general increase in the aggregate youth turnout, it indicates that the ballots on gay marriage were a mobilization factor.

Gay marriage had not emerged as a national issue in 1992, however the recognition of homosexuality in the military was an issue that the majority of young voters supported. Thus, the differences in the candidates' positions on the issue could have mobilized the youth to vote. In 1994, 56 percent of the youth favored that homosexuals could serve openly in the military, while 43 percent opposed {{81 Pew 2012}}. The figures from 1994 are assumed to reflect the attitude of 1992 given the tendency of the youth's liberal position.

The military in the U.S. is an American institution with traditional organizational hierarchy and notion of masculinity. It can be perceived as a stark distinction to homosexuality, and therefore is tension inevitable. Discrimination against homosexuals in the military is evident in the discharge of gays and lesbians in the late 1980s. In 1988, fourteen lesbians were expelled from the Marine Corps. A year later, twelve noncommissioned officers were discharged of duty in the Air Force due to homosexual activity. In 1990, Department of Defense revealed that annually 1,400 homosexuals were discharged from the armed forces {{63 Hunter, James Davison 1991/s192;}}.

During the 1992 election, a position paper written by Chaplain Gene Gomulka was distributed to top-ranking officers in the U.S. military. The purpose of the paper was to make military leaders to consider their position on the issue of homosexuals in the armed forces. The paper claimed that in the intense and close environment of the military the presence of

homosexuals would have consequences. According to Gomulka, gays and lesbians posed physical and psychological threats to others in the military. He believed that they would undermine morale, hurt recruitment, and generate a higher number of AIDS cases. He especially pointed out the possible effect it would have on young people whose characters and minds were in formative stages. Gomulka's superior, Chaplain Ellis, stated that the paper was not hostile towards homosexuals, but towards homosexual behavior {{79 Schmitt, Eric 1992}}. Gomulka's paper was not an official position of the military establishment, but it was published as an article in the Proceedings, a monthly journal of the United States Naval Institute. The paper as well as the discharges illustrate that homosexuality was a significant issue to the military from 1988 to 1992.

The conservative position of the Republican Party might have mobilized young voters to turn out, and vote for Clinton. In 1992, the Republican Party platform announced that the party would not support the democratic effort to include sexual preferences as a protected minority, It also stated that : *"Unlike the Democrat Party and its candidate, we support the continued exclusion of homosexuals from the military as a matter of good order and discipline"* {{80 The Republican Party 1992}}. The Democratic Party Platform of 1992 stated the opposite and that it would *"provide civil rights protection for gay men and lesbians and an end to Defense Department discrimination"* {{78 The Democratic Party 1992}}. Bill Clinton was also the first to ask an openly gay person, Bob Hattoy, to speak at a political convention. Hattoy said, *"So I stand here tonight in support of Bill Clinton, a man who sees the value in each and every member of the American family"* {{88 Towle, Andy 2007}}.

The Republican platform also stressed a cultural war against American values. It placed great emphasis on the American family in form of rights, children, education, health and values. It state that the civilized society of America was under assaults by the media, the entertainment industry, the academic world and the Democratic Party. It defined the war as a guerilla war against American values {{80 The Republican Party 1992}}. The statements on homosexuality and the attack on American values could divide the electorate, and especially push the young voters towards Clinton. Radio host Rachel Maddow, who at the time of Buchanan's speech was 19 years old, and had just come out as a lesbian, recognized his statement as polarization where the Republicans reached out to the more conservative half. She once said that Buchanan was *"without euphemism, declaring that my own country was at war with me."* {{61 Stanley, Timothy 2012}}.

A 1992 Gallup Poll showed that 38 percent of Americans considered homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle {{61 Stanley, Timothy 2012}}. This means that the Republicans' statements did not speak to one third of the electorate, and more likely it only spoke to a minority of young voters. Therefore, young voters were pushed to polls by the Republican Party's position on homosexuality. The high turnout was not a pull towards Clinton because he actually did have a more moderate position towards homosexuals in the military than stated by the Democratic Party Platform. This is evident in 1993 when Clinton signed the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. The policy prohibited the military from discriminating homosexuals, but it still barred the opportunity for gay and lesbians to serve openly.

## **Abortion**

Beside homosexuality, the issue of abortion also generates raw emotion, which also was an important issue in both 1992 and 2004. The issue does not only divide the parties, but also divide across party lines, which mean the position of the candidates could have mobilized as well as pushed voters towards the competing candidates. The issue could have generated the increases in youth turnout in both elections. Out of the 27 percent who claimed moral values were relevant to their vote in 2004, 28 percent claimed that abortion was important {{72 Pew 2004}}. In 1992, the majority of the general electorate as well as the youth did not favor restrictions on abortion. The pro-life position of the Republican Party could have pushed voters towards the Democratic Party. It could also mobilize voters who normally do not vote, but found the issue important, and therefore wanted to vote to ensure the candidate with the more acceptable position towards the issue won.

Especially, the increase of youth turnout in 1992 could be explained by the pro-life position of the Republican Party, and the electorate's liberal attitude towards abortion. Since 1980, the Republican and Democratic Party have taken contrasting position on abortion, and the 1992 election was no exception. The incumbent President, George. H. W. Bush (Bush Sr.), had shown his disapproval of abortion in his opposition of the Freedom of Choice Act as well as his statement about Roe. vs. Wade being a wrong decision that should be overturned. Clinton stated another position when he said; "*the Government simply has no right to interfere with*

*decisions that must be made by women of America to make the right choice*" {{68 Barringer, Felicity 1992}}. The Republican Party Platform of 1992 stressed the party's belief in the unborn child's individual right to life, and that it favored a human life amendment to the U.S. Constitution {{80 The Republican Party 1992}}. The Democratic Party Platform stated that the party supported women's right to choose as ruled by the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade*, and that it was a constitutional liberty of Americans, not government, to be responsible for such a personal decision {{78 The Democratic Party 1992}}.

The public's position on abortion is evident in the 1992 National Election Study (NES), which shows that 47 percent of the respondents opposed any restrictions on abortion. 14 percent favored permitting abortion if "a clear need" existed, while 29 percent would only permit abortion in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life. Only 10 percent of the respondents opposed abortion under any circumstances {{67 Abramowitz, Alan I. /s178;}}. Even among the respondents who identified themselves as Republicans did more than half supported abortion with no restriction or if needed.

The findings suggest that the position of the Republican's party platform did not have much support among the American electorate. The figures above represent the general electorate, but a 2007 Pew report showed that there is a minimal difference between the youth and the general public's attitude towards abortion {{65 Pew 2007/s40;}}. In 1991, 19 percent of young people responded that they would like to hear the candidates discuss their positions on the issue of abortion {{89 Pew 1991}}. In 1992, 56 percent of Americans aged 17-29 stated they knew the candidates position on abortion, and among the 56 percent, 28 percent found abortion important to their vote {{67 Abramowitz, Alan I.}}.

These figures demonstrate that half of the young electorate was aware of the candidates' position on abortion, and among these aware voters about one fourth found the issue important. This means that the Republicans pro-life position did not speak to the general electorate, and also lacked support from young voters. The pro-life position of Bush Sr. could have pushed young voters to the polls to vote for Clinton. This is also evident in figures from NES, which showed that the Republican Party lost more supporters due to the issue of abortion than the Democratic Party. 12 percent of the Republican voters who believed it was the woman's choice voted for Clinton, whereas 6 percent of the Democratic voters who

thought abortion should never be allowed voted for Bush Sr. {{67 Abramowitz,Alan I. /s180;}}).

It could be that turnout increased, because young voters were mobilized by a perception of Clinton's more liberal position on abortion. However, Clinton's position on abortion was not always as liberal. This indicates that young voters were pushed to the polls by Bush Sr.'s conservative position on abortion, rather than pulled by Clinton's position. Despite Clinton's governorship of one of the few states to legalize abortion before 1973, pro-choice was not always reflected in his political action. In 1986, he wrote to an anti-abortion constituent that he was opposed to abortion, and to fund abortion with state money when so many people believed abortion was wrong. In a respond during the 1992 campaign he said: *"Although I have supported certain limited restrictions upon Government funding for abortions, I would not veto any bill requiring Medicaid funding that passed Congress"* {{68 Barringer, Felicity 1992}}. Also Clinton's running mate, Gore, wrote an anti-abortion constituent underlining that it was his *"deep personal conviction"* that abortion was wrong. He stated that he opposed federal funding of abortions, because it was an act of taking a human life. Furthermore, he also voted for an amendment to the 1984 Civil Rights Act to declare an "unborn child" a "person" at conception {{68 Barringer, Felicity 1992}}.

In the end, the perceived difference between the two candidates' position on abortion could have motivated the youth to vote in order to get preferred candidate in office. About one fourth of young people who were aware of the candidates' position found the issue of abortion salient in the 1992 election, and about the majority of the electorate found abortion acceptable or somewhat acceptable. The perception of Clinton's position on abortion could have been questioned due to Clinton and Gore's political actions prior the election. Therefore, it can be argued that it was not Clinton who pulled the young voters to the polls, but they were pushed by Bush Sr.'s pro-life position. This means that the majority of young people voted for Clinton, because he was perceived as the most acceptable choice of the two.

The significant drop in youth turnout in 1996 can be credited to the lack of the culture war on social issue. The 1996 presidential campaigns were much more goal oriented. On October 6 1996, in the first presidential debate Clinton said: *"Four years ago you took me on faith. Now there's a record... We are better off than we were four years ago"* {{98 Denton,Robert E.

1998/s105;}}. His speech focused on the issues of the economy, crime, healthcare, and education, while he avoided mentioning his party or political ideology<sup>7</sup>. Despite the republican candidate, Bob Dole, managed to mention his party as well as his family, the debate showed no signs of a culture war in 1996. The focus of the campaigns was more on the accomplishment since 1992, as well as the discussion of how to proceed. In contrast to Clinton's speech, Dole used his final two minutes to, "*address my remarks to the young people of America because they are the ones who are going to spend most of their life in the twenty-first century*" {{98 Denton,Robert E. 1998/s112;}}. This acknowledgement was more than the youth received from Clinton, but the address failed to target the youth. Instead of getting them motivated on issues at hand, he cautioned them about drugs, and told them how great America is. The audience's questions to the candidates in the second presidential debate illustrated that voters also was status quo oriented{{98 Denton,Robert E. 1998}}. Dole's address to the youth and the campaigns lack of culture war on social issues give the impression that there was no mobilization factor for young people. The attempt by Dole and the lack of attention from Clinton made young voters indifferent, and this was also reflected in the low turnout.

In the end, the large increases in youth turnout could be a mobilization caused by the perceived difference in the positions of the running candidates. Young voters have calculated which candidate would satisfy their preferences. The perception of a significant difference between the candidates and their positions means that electoral participation would outweigh the cost, and thus young voters would turn up at the poll. In the case of abortion as well as homosexuality, the young voters must have considered the difference between the Democratic and Republican candidates in both elections to be relative significant and therefore they decided to participate.

This means that the increase in turnout in 1992 and 2004 could have been triggered by the culture war and voters' perception of ideological distance between candidates. The downturn in 1996 could have been caused by a lack of culture war and voter indifference. The young voters' perception of the difference is formed on their liberal view as well as tendency to lean Democratic, which pushed them to the polls to vote for the candidate they perceived as acceptable to their preferences in the culture war.

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<sup>7</sup> The lack of reference to the Democratic Party could be link to the success of the Republican Party in the 1994 midterm election.

## Conclusion

This thesis has questioned different factors that can affect turnout among young voters, and the answer is that young people vote based on the situation of their preferences. The first section of this thesis points out that the variation in youth turnout cannot be attributed to the institutional factors of the American registration system and the Electoral College. Both factors are constant factors, and therefore, they cannot explain variations such as fluctuation in youth turnout.

With the exception of the National Voter Registration Act, the American registration system has been a constant factor through the period of 1988 to 2008, which means it does not cause fluctuations in turnout. The comparative perspective of voluntary registration systems established that turnout is not affected by the type of registration system. Even though, young people point out registration laws as a barrier for participation, it can only explain variation in youth turnout between states, and not fluctuations in youth turnout between elections. The attempt to liberalize registration laws through the NVRA cannot yet be identified as an influential factor, because it is too soon to estimate a possible delayed effect on turnout.

The Electoral College has also been a constant factor. The rules of how to cast and translate votes into governmental power have not changed, and therefore, it is not the reason for decrease or increase in youth turnout between elections. It encouraged the two party system, the wasted vote factor, as well as the competitive and non-competitive states. However, this can only explain why the U.S. experiences lower turnout in comparison to other electoral systems, and why turnout is higher in some states than others.

This means that the mobilization effort such as campaigns from Rock the Vote and Obama do not cause large increases in turnout. The basis for the campaigns, easy registration and close competition, are not important and thus has not effect. Instead, the second section of this thesis identifies the factors of the economy and the culture war to have influence on fluctuations in youth turnout. Both factors are variables that varied from election to election.

The increase in youth turnout occurred in the years where unemployment was high. This means that the economy affects fluctuations in youth turnout. The strong correlation between

unemployment and turnout establish that economic indicators that affect the youth's financial situation also affect turnout. In other words, young voters assess their own financial well-being during elections, and when they experience economic adversity they vote in an attempt to improve their financial situation. Even though the correlation between the changes in economic growth and youth turnout was weak, it still indirectly affects turnout due to its effect on the unemployment rate.

The increased turnout in 1992 and 2004 was also triggered by the presence of the culture war on social issues. The youth was mobilized to vote due to the perceived difference between the candidates' position on the issues of homosexuality and abortion. The increase in turnout was not caused by a mobilization of the Democratic candidates' positions, because they were not necessarily as liberal as the youth desired. The majority of young voters were likely to vote Democratic anyway, and therefore the positions would not change that. However, the mobilization factor was actually a push by the conservative position of the Republican candidates. It means that young voters participated to ensure that the candidate they perceived as acceptable to their preferences had a better chance of winning.

The effects of the variable factors of the economy and the culture war illustrate that turnout increases when young voters perceive that their preferences will be affected in a negative way. When the young voters' preferences are satisfied and not in danger of negative change, the youth do not consider electoral participation as necessary. Therefore, fluctuations in youth turnout are caused by changes in the variable factors that directly affect young voters' preferences.

This conclusion suggests that in the upcoming election, candidates need to consider other factors in their campaign strategies if they wish to mobilize more young voters. It is not enough to ask young people to participate through the use of their own choice of communication, but it is also necessary to micro target them on the issue they find important. This is easy with the contemporary communication tools, but micro targeting the youth can mean alienation of votes with other priorities. Alienation can be handled with a micro targeting strategy for those voters. However, although micro targeting only reach the intended audience, the target voters can still be exposed to other maybe conflicting positions from the candidates through the general media like television.

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# Appendix 1

## Timeline of American Presidential Elections (1988-2008)

### 1988:

George H.W. Bush (Republican) – President-elect  
Michael Dukakis (Democratic)

### 1992:

Bill Clinton (Democratic) - President-elect  
George H.W. Bush (Republican)  
Ross Perot (Reform)

### 1996:

Bill Clinton (Democratic) - President-elect  
Bob Dole (Republican)  
Ross Perot (Reform)

### 2000:

George W. Bush (Republican) - President-elect  
Al Gore (Democratic)  
Ralph Nader (Green)

### 2004:

George W. Bush (Republican) - President-elect  
John Kerry (Democratic)

### 2008:

Barack Obama (Democratic) - President-elect  
John McCain (Republican)