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Wattenberg, Martin P

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Polls and Elections

From the Obama Youthquake of '08 to the Trumpquake of '16: How Young People's Dislike of Hillary Clinton Cost Her the Election

MARTIN P. WATTENBERG

Young Americans cost Hillary Clinton the presidency. Voters under the age of 30 liked Barack Obama very much in 2016, just as young people did in 2008 and 2012, but a surprising number balked at voting for Hillary Clinton to continue the Obama legacy. For such a pro-Democratic group, the ratings that young voters gave Clinton were astoundingly low in 2016, spurred in large part by the very poor image they had of her personal character. Also surprising is that young people were not particularly put off by the extreme stands that Donald Trump took on many issues.

Keywords: young voters, 2016 election

Young Americans cost Hillary Clinton the presidency—that is the simple message of this article. Voters under the age of 30 liked Barack Obama very much in 2016, just as young people did in 2008 and 2012, but a surprising number of them balked at voting for Hillary Clinton to continue the Obama legacy. For such a pro-Democratic group, the ratings which young voters gave Clinton were astoundingly low in 2016. A big part of the explanation is that they gave her strikingly low ratings in terms of personal character. Granted, they did not like Donald Trump much either, but left with a choice between the lesser of two evils many of them chose to stay away from the polls, about 10% voted for a third-party candidate, and a surprising number voted for Trump.

Young people always have the potential to make a big impact in American elections. Recent elections certainly illustrate this point. Voters under 30 years of age played a key role in Barack Obama's election to the presidency in 2008, with 66% supporting him over John McCain. At the time, young people's key role in bringing Obama to power was often referred to as a "Youthquake." Furthermore, many observers were ready to proclaim that the 2008 election had ended the era of youth apathy and signified the beginning of a new era of youth-based activism that would keep progressives solidly in power for the next generation. As Michelle Obama famously told a large crowd at the University

Martin P. Wattenberg is a professor of political science at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of two recent books on turnout in the United States: *Is Voting for Young People?* and *Where Have All the Voters Gone?*

of California, Los Angeles during the 2008 campaign, “Barack will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved, uninformed” (Geraghty 2008). Of course, that quickly proved easier said than accomplished, as youth turnout plummeted in the Democrats’ disastrous midterm performance in 2010, despite President Obama’s message that year that “Democracy is never a one and done proposition. It is something that requires sustained engagement and sustained involvement” (Stein 2010).

But where young people really let down Obama’s legacy was in their failure to warm toward Hillary Clinton in 2016. As one of the key constituencies of the Democratic Party, the Clinton campaign was depending on young people to provide them with a substantial advantage to counteract the Republicans’ advantage among senior citizens. Although Clinton had failed to do well with young people in the 2008 primaries against Obama and again in 2016 against Bernie Sanders, they were optimistic that the stark choice between Clinton and Trump would propel them to support Clinton in overwhelming numbers. After the election was over, Clinton’s campaign manager, Robby Mook, laid the primary blame for Clinton’s loss on their failure to meet their target for the youth vote. At the quadrennial postelection meeting of campaign managers at Harvard, Mook stated that Clinton’s 55% support among voters fell far short of the >60% they had counted on to win. “That’s why we lost,” Mook clearly stated (Blake 2016).

Clinton’s weakness among young voters was especially pronounced in many of the key Midwestern battleground states that were decided by small margins in Trump’s favor. Compared to 2008, exit polls found that the percentage of young people supporting the Democratic nominee was down 11% in Michigan, 13% in Pennsylvania, and a stunning 17% in Wisconsin. In all three cases, young people gave a substantial percentage of their votes to Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson and Jill Stein of the Greens. As Robby Mook speculated, some young voters may have assumed that Clinton was going to win and decided to vote for a third-party candidate they liked better.

This article shows how Clinton’s unpopularity with young people made it extremely difficult for her to get the level of support she needed from them. Young people just did not like her or respect her character. If the Clinton campaign could not believe how bad the numbers were among young people, I can sympathize; I am still shocked every time I see them. Despite the election night surprise, the preelection American National Election Studies (ANES) data illustrate that Clinton’s critical inability to win over young voters was a foreseeable disaster in the making.

Besides how young people voted in 2016, it is also evident that their turnout rate was crucial to the outcome. Even though young people’s level of support for Clinton was disappointing to the Democrats, they nevertheless were the age group that supported her the most; hence, a low youth turnout was good news for the Trump campaign.

The surge of young voters in 2008—concentrated primarily among minorities—simply could not be replicated in 2016 with the unprecedented level of dislike of both major party nominees. By contrast, the participation rates of senior citizens continued to rise in 2016, thereby providing a boost to the Trump campaign.

The Decline in Young Voters' Support for the Democrats, 2008–2016

The so-called “Youthquake” in the U.S. presidential election of 2008 referred more to the turnout surge than to any great increase in the percentage of young people choosing the Democratic nominee. During the presidency of George W. Bush, young people were very disapproving of his conservative administration, and the youth vote surged toward the Democrats during this period. In 2004, the ANES found that 64% of voters under the age of 30 supported Democratic nominee John Kerry, a percentage that was second only to Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 landslide election. Never before in the ANES time series (which dates back to 1952) had young people supported one major candidate by such a large margin compared to those over age 65. Hence, youth were certainly a ripe group for mobilization under Obama in 2008 and 2012. As shown in Figure 1, 66% of young voters supported Obama in 2008 and the enthusiasm for him continued to be almost as high in 2012. By contrast, the 55% for Hillary Clinton among young voters was a big disappointment, as reflected by her campaign managers’ forthright postelection assessment. No other age group saw their support for the Democratic presidential election by such a large amount. The result was a quite substantial lessening of the relationship between age and the presidential vote in 2016.

After Trump’s election shocked the world, many political observers quickly pointed to how he improved the Republicans’ performance with non-college-educated voters. This change in voting behavior is certainly evident among young voters who had not gone to college. There was absolutely no decline in support for the Democratic ticket among young voters with at least some college education. In 2012, 58% of these voters supported Barack Obama and in 2016 the exact same percentage voted for Hillary

FIGURE 1. Percent voting Democratic for president by age category, 2008–2016. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: 2008–2016 American National Election Studies.

Clinton. In contrast, the bottom dropped out in terms of Democratic support among young voters without any college experience. Traditionally, their support for Democrats has been somewhat higher than their college-educated peers, reflecting their lower socioeconomic status. But their support for Hillary Clinton fell to a mere 49% as compared to 69% for Obama in 2012. It is rare to see a demographic group shift so markedly, and this sea change clearly contributed to Hillary Clinton's stunning defeat.

Hillary Clinton's Abysmal Ratings Among Young People

In spite of the fact that young voters in the 2008 Democratic primaries vastly preferred Obama to Clinton, there is absolutely no sign that young people disliked Clinton in either the 2008 or 2012 ANES data. In 2008, her mean feeling thermometer rating among respondents under the age of 30 was 59, and in 2012 while serving as Obama's Secretary of State she received an average rating of 60 among young people. In 2016 her mean rating crashed to 41 amid the crush of criticism from the left and right and the e-mail controversy. If Robby Mook and the rest of the Clinton strategists expected to get at least 60% of young people's votes with such abysmal ratings, it would seem that they were viewing the world through rose-colored glasses. The mean rating among young voters does not even fully reflect just how terribly they viewed Hillary Clinton. A third of young voters gave Clinton a rating of 15 or below on the feeling thermometer, meaning that they had either very cold or quite cold feelings about her. Only 45% reported any degree of warm feelings toward her. And those who saw her warmly were less extreme in their ratings than those who viewed her coldly; just 7% gave her a rating of 85 or above, meaning they had either very warm or quite warm feelings about her.

To put Clinton's poor ratings among young voters in perspective, Figure 2 compares her mean feeling thermometer ratings to those of Obama in 2008 and 2012 among four age groupings. The 2008 and 2012 ratings of Obama show the familiar age relationship, with Obama's ratings going steadily down as one moves from the youngest to the oldest respondents. Obama could thus well consider young people to be one of his key groups of supporters. In contrast, in 2016 voters under the age of 30 were the most negative toward Hillary Clinton. In light of young people's greater support for Democrats in the previous three presidential elections, it is shocking to see that young voters actually rated Clinton lower than senior citizens. Similarly, on the open-ended likes/dislikes questions, a stunning 68% of young people said there was something they disliked about Hillary Clinton that would make them vote against her; even senior citizens were not so inclined to say something negative, with only 63% offering a negative comment about her.

One can quickly rule out any notion that young people had warmer feelings about Donald Trump compared to previous Republican nominees. Figure 3 displays the mean feeling thermometer ratings of McCain, Romney, and Trump by age category. The relationship found in 2016 is the familiar one, with positive feelings toward the Republican candidate increasing with age. Trump received a rating of about 12 to 15 points lower

FIGURE 2. Mean feeling thermometer ratings of Democratic candidates by age group, 2008–2016. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: 2008–2016 American National Election Studies.

than Romney among all four age groups; young people were no exception, giving Trump a mean rating of just 30 as compared to 45 for Romney.

Another hypothesis that can also be ruled out is that young people became disillusioned with Democrats in general due to disappointment with Obama's performance, unfulfilled promises, and perhaps a yearning for more left-wing stands. The ANES continued to ask respondents to rate Obama on a feeling thermometer in 2016, even though he was not on the ballot. The mean ratings he received among voters were almost identical to those from 2012 among all four age groups. In particular, the same young voters who gave Hillary Clinton a mean rating of 41 in 2016 gave Barack Obama a mean score of 63. Hence, young people still liked Obama in 2016 and probably would have voted for him at the same rate they did in 2012. For some reason, they just did not like the notion of giving Clinton four years to continue the Obama legacy.

Given the candidate-centered nature of American elections, the most likely explanation for why young people were so negative about Clinton but not Obama was due to how they perceived her personal character. As Lincoln famously said, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." American voters know that character counts in the Oval Office and if they do not trust a candidate or feel that the candidate is a strong leader it will significantly lessen the chances that voters will support them. Unlike parliamentary systems, they know that a president is more than first among equals and other elected officials in the party cannot simply replace an unsuitable leader between elections. Although the character factor has declined in importance in recent years (Wattenberg 2016a), there is still plenty of evidence that candidate character matters quite a lot, especially if voters perceive flaws that are likely to impact performance.

FIGURE 3. Mean feeling thermometer ratings of Republican candidates by age group, 2008–2016. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: 2008–2016 American National Election Studies.

Young voters most certainly thought they saw many important character flaws in Hillary Clinton in 2016. Table 1 compares trait assessments of Obama in 2008 to Clinton in 2016 among four age categories. Respondents were asked how well traits like honest and strong leader described the candidates—extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all. I recoded the responses on a zero to 100 scale in each instance for ease of presentation. On almost all the items, each age group rated Clinton substantially lower than Obama eight years prior. But this was especially true for young people, whose trait ratings of Clinton were dreadful compared to young people's assessment of Obama in 2008. On all four traits that were asked about in both years, young people gave Obama the best rating among the four age groups whereas Clinton received her lowest marks from young people. Normally, being the age group that voted for Clinton at the highest level, young people should have been the most likely to give her high character ratings. The fact that so many young people had so little respect for Clinton's character was probably a major reason why the Clinton campaign missed their target of >60% support from voters under age 30.

In particular, young voters who had not gone to college had extremely negative assessments of Clinton's personal character. Among this group, 65% said the term honest described her either not well at all or only slightly well, and 61% said the same about whether Clinton cared about people like them. Despite her long experience in government, just 40% of non-college-educated young voters thought the term knowledgeable described her very or extremely well, and just 28% were similarly positive about her ability to exercise strong leadership. Granted, Trump's ratings on personal characteristics were equally as bad and in some cases worse. But with the choice seeming like a choice between two evils, the road was open for the 42% of non-college-educated youth to vote

TABLE 1
Trait Assessments of Democratic Candidates by Age, 2008–2016 (0 = not well at all, 25 = slightly well, 50 = moderately well, 75 = very well, 100 = extremely well)

	18–29	30–44	45–64	65+
<i>Obama</i> 2008 strong leader	66	57	56	50
<i>Clinton</i> 2016 strong leader	41	47	43	42
<i>Obama</i> 2008 honest	57	53	55	53
<i>Clinton</i> 2016 honest	25	29	26	27
<i>Obama</i> 2008 knowledgeable	67	62	62	59
<i>Clinton</i> 2016 knowledgeable	55	61	63	61
<i>Obama</i> 2008 really cares	62	55	55	50
<i>Clinton</i> 2016 really cares	35	40	37	37

Source: 2008–2016 American National Election Studies.

for him and for another 9% to cast an expressive vote for a third-party candidate. All in all, it was a far cry from eight years earlier when non-college-educated young people looked upon Obama’s personal qualities with great admiration and gave him 68% of their votes.

Did Trump’s Extreme Issue Stands Turn Off Young People?

Another strategy that the Clinton campaign counted on in 2016 was that Donald Trump’s extreme stand on issues like immigration, foreign trade, torture, and putting America first would particularly turn off young voters. Young people are generally thought to be more cosmopolitan, tolerant of minorities, and supportive of human rights than their more conservative elders (Dalton 2016). By turning the agenda to issues such as deporting unauthorized immigrants, ending free trade agreements, and reinstating torture of suspected terrorists, it might be thought that Trump would be particularly alienating young Americans. The Clinton campaign felt that Trump’s extreme stands on such issues, none of which were emulated by John McCain when he ran as the Republican nominee in 2008, would make it very hard for young people to support him.

In actuality, the differences between age groups on the flashpoint issues that Trump highlighted in 2016 were not especially large. As shown in Table 2, young people were only somewhat more opposed to Trump’s ideas about immigration than senior citizens. For example, 52% of young respondents were against building a solid wall between Mexico and the United States, as compared to 42% among the oldest respondents. On some of the questions regarding foreign trade, young people actually were more supportive of Trump’s position than seniors. For example, they were less in favor of free trade agreements with other countries and less likely to believe that increasing international trade was good for the United States and were the least likely to oppose

TABLE 2
Views of Trump's Flashpoint Issue Stands by Age in 2016

	18–29	30–44	45–64	65+
Send unauthorized immigrants home	16	17	20	16
Have a guest worker program	14	15	14	16
Allow to remain and become citizens	70	68	66	68
Favor ending birthright citizenship	22	27	35	35
Neither favor nor oppose	30	30	29	26
Oppose ending birthright citizenship	48	43	37	39
Favor building a wall at Mexican border	23	25	39	39
Neither favor nor oppose	25	26	21	19
Oppose building a wall at Mexican border	52	49	40	42
Favor admitting Syrian refugees to USA	32	25	18	18
Neither favor nor oppose	34	26	28	27
Oppose admitting Syrian refugees to USA	34	49	54	54
Agree—USA better off if just stayed home	44	38	30	23
Disagree—USA better off if just stayed home	56	62	70	77
Favor limits on foreign imports	53	56	65	60
Oppose limits on foreign imports	44	41	33	37
Increasing trade with other countries good	44	46	45	48
Neither good nor bad	39	37	31	32
Bad for USA	17	17	24	20
Favor free trade agreements	34	37	40	42
Neither favor nor oppose	44	44	39	38
Oppose free trade agreements	22	20	21	21
Favor torture for suspected terrorists	22	25	25	22
Neither favor nor oppose	38	34	34	30
Oppose	40	42	41	48

Source: 2016 American National Election Studies.

Trump's desire to reinstate torture for suspected terrorists. In addition, respondents under age 30 were the most in tune with Trump's America-first platform, as they were the age group most likely to agree with the statement that the United States would be better off if it just stayed home.

In contrast to these minor differences on Trump's flashpoint issues, young people exhibited clear liberal attitudes on most social and cultural issues. For example, they were far more likely than older people to support legalization of marijuana and gay marriage, requiring parental leave be provided, and not allowing businesses to deny services to same-sex couples. Similarly, young people differed from their elders by quite a great deal on traditional partisan issues. They were far more likely to favor decreased defense spending, regulating business to protect the environment, providing government aid to blacks, and government-provided health care as opposed to relying on the private market.

FIGURE 4. How young non-college-educated voters compared to their college peers on three issue indices. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: 2016 American National Election Studies.

The main question to be answered regarding the issue attitudes of young people, though, is how non-college-educated voters compared to their college-educated peers. A key part of Trump's strategy was to distract voters from the usual social-cultural and partisan issues that generally favor the Democrats. Instead, he aimed to turn public attention to hot-button flashpoint issues that could tap the alienation of the less-educated voters with the modern global economy that has so favored educated professionals in recent decades. Figure 4 compares young voters with and without college experience on three issue indices. On all three indices, young voters who had not gone to college were more conservative. But this is especially the case on Trump's flashpoint issues, on which the less-educated youth actually had more conservative than liberal views. To the extent that Trump was able to get these voters to focus on these hot-button issues rather than social issues it is evident that the potential existed for drawing significant votes away from Hillary Clinton. Multivariate analysis reveals that this definitely occurred. Among young voters, controlling for party identification, flashpoint issues had much more significant impact on vote choice than social or partisan issues in a binary logistic regression analysis.

The Continuing Age–Turnout Gap in 2016

The age gap in turnout in U.S. presidential elections has existed for quite some time now (Leighley and Nagler 2014; Wattenberg 2016b). Hence, the lower turnout of young people compared to seniors was fully to be expected. Nevertheless, this gap has fluctuated substantially in recent years, and to the extent that the gap could be closed the Democratic candidate would definitely benefit. Closing this gap is much easier said than done, however, for two major reasons. First, young people would have to be stimulated to

FIGURE 5. Strong interest in presidential campaigns among young people as compared to seniors, 1952–2016. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Source: 1952–2016 American National Election Studies.

be more interested in the presidential campaign than has been true in most recent years. Second, the parties would have to substantially increase their recent efforts to contact young people to mobilize them to exercise their franchise. As will be shown in this section, neither scenario was evident in the 2016 ANES survey data.

One of the most fundamental truths regarding turnout is that those who are very interested in the campaign invariably vote at extremely high rates whereas those who have only some or marginal interest are far less likely to participate. Data on interest in the presidential campaign exist for the entire 1952–2016 ANES time series; Figure 5 graphs the percentage who said they were “very interested” in the campaign for both young people and seniors.¹ In the early years, the gap in strong political interest between young and old was relatively minimal. But this gap has grown markedly over the last few presidential elections, as strong political interest among young people has declined slightly whereas older people have become more and more enraptured with following presidential campaigns. In 2016, 68% of senior citizens said they were very interested in the campaign compared to just 29% of those under 30 years of age.

The new media environment, which provides more choice than ever before of what news, if any, people receive has led to this vast age gap in political interest and attention (Prior 2007). The cable news channels provide around-the-clock political entertainment for those interested in watching, which is increasingly concentrated among the elderly population. The mean age of all the cable news channels has regularly been found to be in the 60s in recent years (Ariens 2015). Even a cursory look at the advertisements placed on these channels on any given day will verify the accuracy of such statistics. One rarely sees anything advertised that would be highly marketable to young people, whereas ads for

1. Typically, the other age categories are in between the young and old in terms of political interest; hence, these categories have not been included in the graph to make for better readability.

various medical remedies to the ailments of old age are omnipresent. The Internet, of course, provides more opportunity to explore the political world than ever before possible. Yet the key factor to consider about what the Internet offers regarding political information is that browsing is inherently purposive (Hindman 2009). One must have the basic interest in politics in the first place in order to be sufficiently motivated to obtain political information from the Internet. As of 2016, young people clearly trailed their elders in this respect. Just 34% of young respondents said that they paid attention to politics and elections always or most of the time compared to 69% among seniors.

One way that young people could be induced to participate in presidential elections with marginal interest would be to contact them to urge them to vote. Social science research has consistently shown that personal contact of some sort is one of the best ways to increase an individual's likelihood of voting (Green and Gerber 2015). The problem with regard to mobilizing young people is that the basics of contacting strategy discourage campaigns from focusing on them. A perfectly rational strategy for any campaign is to concentrate its contacting resources on people who are (1) the most likely to vote and (2) the easiest to reach. To violate either of these principles would amount to an inefficient use of campaign resources. And unfortunately, young people are the least likely to meet these criteria for efficient campaign contacts.

First, when a campaign invests resources to knock on a door, it ought to have a reasonable expectation that someone in the household will actually vote. The availability of computerized registration lists that record each individual's recent history of actually voting has become an invaluable source of information to campaigns, making it easier than ever before to target likely voters. A clear bias resulting from such targeting is that young people who lack a track record of voting participation are less likely to meet this criterion for campaign contacts. Second, although phone banks enable campaigns to reach out to more individuals than possible in person, young people are less likely to be on the receiving end simply because they are less likely to answer. Young people are more likely to be out at night when phone banks usually operate. Furthermore, the recent trend toward reliance strictly on cell phones among young adults has made them even more difficult for campaigns to reach via a phone call (Blumberg and Luke 2017). Most people are unlikely to answer a call from an unknown number on their cell phone. In addition, robo-dialing to cell phones is currently forbidden by federal communications law. Thus, young people who rely exclusively on cell phones will never be on the receiving end of prerecorded political messages that many campaigns employ today. In sum, there is good reason to expect that campaign contacts have increasingly slighted young people in recent years.

The available data from the quadrennial ANES are ideal for testing whether the pattern of campaign contacts by age has indeed changed over time. Since 1956, these surveys have asked the following question in each presidential election: "As you know, the political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?" The percentage of people who reported some sort of contact is displayed for young people as compared to seniors in Figure 6. Since 1996, campaign contacts have grown at an amazing rate, with the parties focusing increasingly on mobilizing the elderly as opposed to young people. This trend continued unabated in the

FIGURE 6. Party contact among young people as compared to seniors, 1956–2016. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Note: The 2016 data showed substantial differences between the face-to-face and web samples. Hence, for the sake of time-series comparability, only face-to-face interviews are included in this analysis.

Source: 1952–2016 American National Election Studies, face-to-face interviews only.

Obama elections, despite the Obama campaign's clear interest in young voters. In the Obama–Romney contest, contacts with young people fell to just 14%—nearly the lowest ever—whereas contacts with the elderly held at its all-time high of 65%. In 2016 the weakness of the Trump ground game saw the contact gap actually shrink, as contacting by the Republicans declined substantially. Nevertheless, Figure 6 shows that the pattern of older people receiving far more campaign contacts continued to hold true.

As startling as these data are, the simple measure displayed in Figure 6 actually underestimates how much the campaigns now concentrate their mobilization efforts on the elderly. A follow-up question probes those who have been contacted as to which party, or parties, contacted them. The elderly proved to be such a prime catch for the parties that the percentage who reported that both Democrats and Republicans contacted them was 15% in 2016 as compared to a mere 1% among young people. All told, for every 100 senior citizens the Clinton and Trump campaigns made 58 voter contacts; by contrast, for every 100 young people the parties made just 15 contacts.

Given young people's relative lack of interest in the 2016 presidential race and the benign neglect they received from the campaign organizations, it is no wonder that their typical poor turnout rates were once again evident. Compared to Obama's first victory in 2008, the Census Bureau's surveys found that turnout among citizens under the age of 30 fell from 51.1 to 46.1%. In particular, the turnout among young blacks—a demographic that is overwhelmingly supportive of Democratic candidates—fell precipitously. Among blacks between the ages of 18 to 24, turnout dropped dramatically from 56 to 42%, and those ages 25–44 saw their turnout rate decline from 64 to 56%.

At the same time, the Census Bureau found that turnout among senior citizens continued to rise slightly, increasing from 70.3 to 70.9% nationwide. And restricting the

analysis to just non-Hispanic white citizens, the turnout increase was slightly higher, rising from 72.6 to 73.4%. All told, these changes in turnout clearly helped the Trump campaign and struck another key blow to Clinton's chances in 2016.

Although these census estimates are based on tens of thousands of interviews and with the highest response rate in the survey business, they are nevertheless subject to substantial errors in reporting of participation. It is well known that voting participation is overreported by respondents due to social desirability bias (Holbrook and Krosnick 2010). Fortunately, data are available from six states that report the actual number of people within various age groups that have cast a ballot. Although it is a secret how someone votes in America, the act of casting a ballot is a matter of public record. Information on voter registration forms is also officially recorded, including the year of one's birth. Alaska, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, and South Carolina routinely issue reports detailing the exact number of votes cast by people within various age categories. By dividing these numbers into Census Bureau yearly estimates of the population within these age categories, turnout percentages by age category can easily be calculated. The only drawback of these calculations is that they do include noncitizens who are not eligible to vote. However, the percentage of noncitizens in all these states is well below the national average at between 3 and 7%, and their noncitizen rate has been quite constant in recent elections. Hence, these state-based turnout statistics by age are very precise and reliable.

Figure 7 displays the trends in turnout among the youngest and oldest age categories in the six states for which records are readily available from 2008 to 2016. These data suggest that the census may have underestimated how much the age gap in turnout has increased. Averaging the percentages reveals that youth turnout declined by 6.2% whereas turnout among the oldest group in each state went up by an average of 2.5%. All told, these disappointing youth turnout statistics combined with the Clinton campaign's failure to come within even 5% of their target among young people who did vote spelled doom for the Democrats' presidential chances in 2016. Young people hardly elected Trump on their own, but their unwillingness to get out large enough numbers to support Clinton proved crucial to his stunning victory.

Antisystem Attitudes and Young People in the Era of Trump

Since Donald Trump became president, democratic theorists have worried more about the state of democracy in America than probably at any other time since World War II. Many analysts see troubling antidemocratic tendencies within the Trump coalition and worry about their commitment to basic democratic values, such as minority rights and respect for the basic rule of law. For example, David Leonhardt (2016) wrote in the *New York Times* a week after the election, "The most fragile part of the country right now is our democratic values." More recently, the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial stating their view, "These are not normal times. The man in the White House is reckless and unmanageable, a danger to the Constitution, a threat to our democratic institutions" (*Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board 2017).

FIGURE 7. Official data on turnout among young and old people in six states that report actual records, 2008–2016. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Note: Young is age 18–24 for all states except Delaware (which is 18–29) and South Carolina (which is 18–21); Old is 65+ in all states except North Carolina (which is 66+) and Kentucky (which is 62+).

Sources: Secretary of State websites for these five states for actual number of votes cast per each age group; U.S. Census Bureau estimates of voting age population.

Based on the ANES data, there is certainly evidence that Trump voters were more supportive of a strong leader who might ignore fundamentals of American democracy. Compared to Clinton voters, Trump voters were substantially more likely to agree with the statement, “Having a strong leader is good for the US even if the leader bends the rules to get things done.” In addition to wanting a strong leader to bend the rules, Trump voters also were markedly more in agreement with the view that our country needs a “strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path.” Befitting these preferences for a strong leader even at the price of sacrificing democratic

principles, Trump voters were also more in favor of the statement that “the will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities.”

As the age group that voted the least for Trump, one might expect young people to be considerably less inclined to forgo adherence to basic democratic principles than their elders. However, the results are disappointing for those who might be expecting young people to clearly lead the way in defending democratic values now that Trump has become president. The correlation between age and each of these measures of one’s willingness to shrink from democratic values is relatively weak, ranging from .04 to .07. Young people have already been in the vanguard of protest marches against the Trump administration, and no doubt they will continue in this role. But this is mostly because young people are always at the forefront of protest marches of any sort; there is no reason to expect them to be especially concerned about threats to democratic values based on the ANES data.

Another concerning finding regarding young people and the future of the American democracy is the striking degree of alienation from the political system that they expressed in the post-election ANES survey. Forty-five percent of respondents under the age of 30 said they were either not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the United States. By comparison, just 22% of senior citizens interviewed responded so negatively about the workings of American democracy.

Young Americans’ views of civic duty were also quite discouraging to see in 2016. Just 20% of young people interviewed by the ANES said that they felt very strongly that voting is a duty as compared to 50% of seniors. And on the other side of the spectrum, 45% of young people said that voting is more of a choice than a duty, whereas just 30% of seniors took this position.

Conclusion: Looking Toward the 2018 Midterms

As the world looks to see whether Americans will act to constrain the Trump administration by shifting Congress toward the Democrats in 2018, there is little reason to expect young voters to play a key role in any such movement. Given young voters’ relatively low interest in following political affairs and their relatively low levels of civic duty, they typically vote at appallingly low rates in low-stimulus midterm elections. In 2014, for example, the Census Bureau’s national survey revealed that just 20% of citizens under the age of 30 voted, the lowest such figure ever recorded. Even worse, their registration rate also fell to a new low, indicating a woeful level of political interest.

Some examples from statewide voter participation records make it even clearer how substantial the problem of getting young Americans to vote in midterm elections has become. In Iowa, where a competitive Senate race in 2014 resulted in a relatively high midterm turnout, senior citizens were four times as likely to vote as those ages 18 to 24. Such a turnout gap looks good compared to localities where the dearth of competitive races led to more typical poor midterm turnout rates. In California, just 8% of citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 cast a ballot in 2014 according to an analysis of the voter file analyzed by the California Civic Engagement Project at the University of California,

Davis (Romero 2015). Californians between the ages of 65 to 74 were seven times more likely to cast a ballot than 18–24-year-olds, and even people over the age of 75 were more than six times as likely to vote as California's young citizens. Lest one think that California is an aberrant example, data from New York City provide another amazing case of low youth turnout. The city's Voter Assistance Advisory Committee found that just 11% of registered voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted. Adjusting for the typical 60% registration rate among this age group, this would mean that only about 7% of young citizens living in the Big Apple voted in 2014. As the *New York Daily News* put it in their inimitable way, this report was "a reminder that voter turnout stinks" (Katz 2015).

The evidence is overwhelming that young people passed up their chance to vote in the last two midterm elections that gave huge gains to the Republicans, thereby setting up a roadblock for Obama's agenda. The fact that young people, who were highly supportive of President Obama, had such a low turnout rate in the midterm elections was highly damaging to Democratic prospects at the polls. My rough estimate is that had turnout rates been equal among all age groups, the Democratic percentage of the congressional vote would have been about 1.7% higher—clearly enough to enable the Democrats to hold on to substantially more seats. If young people continue to sit mostly on the sidelines in the 2018 midterms, it will certainly help the Republicans. Who votes does make a difference.

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