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Simulation of increased youth turnout on the presidential election of 2004

Youth voting has become a major issue in campaign politics. The 18 to 24 year old population, or 'Generation Y', represents the largest group of nonvoting but eligible Americans, with overall turnout for this group declining more than 13% between 1972 and 2000. This research explores the potential impact of high levels of participation among this group on presidential politics. Traditional studies suggest that increased voter turnout should favor Democratic candidates, because nonvoters share characteristics with those who vote for Democrats. Empirical research has failed to demonstrate a clear relationship, however, between higher turnout and Democratic success. I engage this literature by exploring the impact of full turnout among one of the most heavily mobilized groups in America, young voters, on the presidential election of 2004. Using a novel approach to voter studies, I marry census data with voter exit polls to estimate a partisan preference in nonvoting youth. I then use this partisan preference to estimate the impact of higher youth voter turnout on the national vote totals for both John Kerry and George Bush. Because of the Electoral College and the institutional characteristics of Presidential elections in this country, however, this national impact really has no meaning. Thus, I simulate the impact of full youth voter turnout state by state and assess the impact on electoral vote totals. The findings from these analyses suggest that youth nonvoters in 2004 were more likely to vote Democratic and full turnout among this group would have significantly increased John Kerry's share of the popular vote. Even if every person in this heavily mobilized group had turned out, however, it would have had essentially no impact on electoral vote totals and, thus, no impact on the outcome of 2004 election. Based on these findings, I conclude that previous studies on the potential and actual impact of turnout on presidential politics may have arrived at disparate conclusions because they did not take into account the institutional realities of presidential selection in this country.