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**Millennial Issues and Millennial Voters: The Opinions of Today's Youth**

**John Proffitt**

**Thesis completed for Departmental Honors in Political Science**

**Spring 2014**

## Chapter 1. Introduction

In recent presidential elections a trend is emerging that defies conventional wisdom about American politics. Young people are now voting in increasing numbers, despite historically being one of the least likely groups to turn out on Election Day. This fact has been picked up by the media and has been the subject of much curiosity, but as of yet, no solid explanation for the trend has emerged. As reported by the *New York Times* in 2008, around 2 million more people under the age of 29 voted in that year's election as compared to 2004, at a rate not seen since 1972 (Falcone 2008). The difference can also be represented in percentages, with close to 52% of the demographic voting in 2008 as compared to 49% in 2004 (Winerip 2012). In terms of voter registration, today's youth is ahead of previous historical trends too. In 2008 61% of the 18 to 28 demographic was registered to vote, as compared to 58% in 1976 (Winerip 2012). Along with increased participation, youth worldwide have taken to conducting highly visible political demonstrations to express their feelings, such as through the Occupy Movement (Ruggeri 2009, 31). This makes the present time seems ripe to study youth political behavior.

Historically, the relationship between politics and the younger voting age population, or even those soon to enter the voting age population, has received a lot of popular attention. Given a generally noted trend of youth participation, you could say that youth involvement in politics actually receives a disproportionately large degree of media attention. The 1960s is one time period known for intense activity, both in the Civil Rights movement and in the anti-war movement. In hindsight, 1968 is seen as a big year overall, but even before then it is clear that people saw the potential for action from these movements that were driven by the youth. Newspapers from earlier years not only took note of the "hippie" movement, as they put it, but

also discussed how the movement was organizing and what possible effect it would have on society at large (Arnold 1967, 40). This coverage at times can be oddly similar to modern coverage of youth political involvement, regarding such movements through the lens of a suspicious outsider.

The modern youth movements such as Occupy Wall Street are not always greeted with confusion, however, and to a degree seems to have achieved something of a collective stardom in the media spotlight. Even if the movement has subsided somewhat recently, the media still likes to talk about it, or even that fact specifically (Schneider 2013, 18). The ties to current developments in technology are also frequently touted for cross topic appeal. The use of social media by youth activists and protesters is much talked about in media circles (Kahne and Middaugh 2012, 52). The interactivity of this form of communication means that anyone, no matter whom or where they are, can see, or participate in, what is being organized by the younger generation. An unprecedented level of insight is available for all to see (Kahne and Middaugh 2012, 52). In 2008 the media was very quick to seize upon the fact that there was a wave of young voters voting for Barack Obama, and speculating about how much this effect contributed to his victory (Ruggeri 2009, 30). The scramble to report on this in part is because while the discussion of the subject is popular, it is somewhat uncharted territory, so to speak.

The fact that more study needs to be done on youth involvement in politics is so self-evident that many mass media publications throw in frequent lamentations that there is insufficient data available for more speculation (Ruggeri 2009, 30). For researchers, there are a number of potential areas for investigation. Economics, parental influence, and increased education are all being looked into as sparks that prompted the increase in youth political activity

(Levine and Youniss 2009, 3). One critical area seems to have a gap in coverage, however.

Partially due to the wide ranging implications that need to be investigated, and partially due to how little time has passed since the trend has made itself felt, relatively little work has been done to survey the people directly involved in this movement. Outwardly some conclusions can be drawn from the outspoken goals of the millennial protest movements, but in terms of traditional opinion gathering and analysis of the group as a whole getting a complete picture is difficult.

The goal of this project is to find out using concrete evidence what factors are motivating today's youth to vote in larger numbers than the demographic has for the past few decades. The topic is broad, so a narrow focus must be used to remain effective. Therefore, the study will be done through the lens of issue based voting analysis. Issues are easy to visualize and easy to quantify, unlike broader topics such as overall ideology.

Of course, only looking at a traditional opinion poll will not produce anything that can specifically relate to the motivation of young political activists. Another key factor has to be measured, issue importance. Everyone has an opinion on every issue, even if that opinion is that they do not care about that issue. Most polls do not measure a respondent's willingness to act upon an opinion, though, even if a scale is provided to rank the strength of the opinion. If an individual or group's motivation is to be examined, this aspect must be given more attention.

One last key feature to consider is that young voters do not exist in a political vacuum. By definition, for young voters to exist there must be older voters to compare them to.

Therefore, the goal of this research is to find out what issues specifically motivate young voters and if those issues and the strength of motivation are significantly different from older voters.

One effective way to get information to analyze is by going straight to the source and conducting

a poll of young voters that is specifically designed with questions that will support a motivation-based approach. Based on past public experience with youth movements, media coverage, and existing scholarly research, a broad prediction can be made, namely that the current upward trend in youth voting has been motivated by increasing importance placed on social issues and a few key economic issues that are especially important to the young demographic, such as education assistance.

Chapter 2 of this thesis will review the existing research on youth voting. The anti-Vietnam War movement, Civil Rights movement, and other events in the 1960s and 70s have provided material of interest to scholars in the past that is of important note. With that material in place for review, an outline of the survey conducted and the methodology behind it will come in Chapter 3. Conducting a survey is a delicate process that requires not only a good design to ensure the desired research questions are answered, but also that a strict ethical standard be maintained. Chapter 4 will contain the survey results. Age-based connections to issue importance on specific issues will be given a great deal of discussion, or lack thereof in some cases. Both are equally important when understanding the big picture. Notable connections to respondents being for or against issues will also be reported on, as well as any other notable findings among even smaller demographical breakdowns of the data set. The last chapter will tie the project together with the existing research and summarize what the findings mean for the discipline at large and understanding youth political motivation. The survey questions and charts detailing the findings can be found in the appendix.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

While the existing research has not given much attention to using an issue-based approach, it is still quite relevant when understanding the complete picture. Most of the existing research on youth and political participation is either focused on a previous time frame or location, where issues are much different than they are today, or are focused on a broader scope. However, the literature still provides a solid place to start with new efforts.

A historical analysis of the study of youth politics is a good starting point for a more detailed analysis. Interest in the field was first generated in the 1960's and 70's, following the protest movements surrounding the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. Some of the things researchers looked at the time are the same as what the media likes to focus on today. For instance, despite higher levels of youth participation in political rallies and other events, researchers still found a high level of youth voter apathy in the 1970 midterm elections (Hyman 1972, 369). In fact, participation was found to match previous data predicting youth voting levels before those events had occurred, and also showed that youth voting had not increased or declined compared to the other segments of the voting population as well (Hyman 1972, 370). As the period of youth agitation came to a close, many scholars were left feeling as if the research that increased interest had yielded left just as many new questions as answers to previous quandaries (Hyman 1972, viii). Data suggested not much had changed during this time period, but public perception had clearly been altered.

Around the same time there were some studies on how new voters developed party identification, focusing on how much of one's political views were inherited from one's parents. One panel study that surveyed new voters who came of age in 1965 along with their parents over

a period of decades concluded that parents did have a major influence over their children's political behavior (Niemi and Jennings 1991, 971). Interestingly, over time the younger generation's stance on various issues wavered a bit as life experience was accumulated, but party identification was much harder to shake (Niemi and Jennings 1991, 986). This was the generation that participated most actively in that era's protests, but while those events could be discerned from the data, it also showed that in more intellectual terms not much change had actually occurred regarding political ideology of new voters, despite what actions would suggest.

Moving on to the 1990s, research tended to focus on the fact that youth politics was typically ignored by most politicians and the populace at large. Authors also focused on youth disillusion with said lack of focus, something previous research had also hinted at. For instance, one study in the United Kingdom purported that one major source of frustration was the ambiguity of a person's legal status during their later years as a dependent and early years as an adult (Coleman and Warren-Adamson 1992, 21). One example the study gave was on a subject that is also controversial in the United States, parental consent regarding medical treatment of minors, especially when it comes to reproductive health. The report cited a 1985 law that in essence gave doctors the final say on if an adolescent's parents should be informed if they asked for contraceptives, but also left room for doctors to be punished if there was later complaint from the parents if they were not informed (Coleman and Warren-Adamson 1992, 22). While legal ambiguity could certainly create problems for doctors in this situation, it also caused tension for their patients, as one could never be sure if a particular doctor would be sympathetic to them if they took a leap of faith. Regardless of any moral problems with the situation, the law would instill a sense of mistrust with young adults towards the medical system (Coleman and Warren-



Adamson 1992, 22). Another specific issue perhaps more relatable in the United States is the disparity between the official age of adulthood, 18, and the drinking age, 21. Some psychologists believe that when laws such as these create an effect where young adults are given some responsibility, but are at the same time restrained, it hampers the development of maturity. In turn, the study postulated, young people did not vote because it was seen as an activity that carried too great a burden for them (Coleman and Warren-Adamson 1992, 23). In short, the lack of youth participation could be seen overall as a lack of faith in the system on the part of young people.

In recent years, greater emphasis has been given to studying how new forms of media, such as internet blogs, YouTube, and the 24-hour news cycle, are affecting potential young voters. Even early on in the digital revolution this was specifically an area of interest focused on young people. The young were seen as “early adopters” of new technology, and thus researchers hoped to glean information about the society of the future by how children and teens were already changing (Livingstone 2002, 3). Particularly of interest was the fact that the media were becoming increasingly integrated into the average citizen's daily life. Before the digital revolution, media outlets were limited in number, and only had access to the young audience perhaps during a family hour after dinner. By 1999, however, it was reported that on average someone between the ages of 6 and 17 spent around five hours a day in contact with some form of media device, thanks to the proliferation of bedroom television sets and the internet (Livingstone 2002, 77). It would be a little while longer before these analyses began to be used to look at potential future political behavior, though, but this work laid an essential frame for further study.

In the first years of the new century, research started to be done on media as a way to participate in the political process. Once the electronic infrastructure had developed to a certain point it was quickly identified both by activists and scholars as a good tool for organizing political activity (FisherKeller, 2011, 50). The Middle-East in particular has been a region of the world where new media have had a great impact in political engagement. Part of the phenomenon is increasing awareness. The tactic of interest groups holding events to raise awareness is an old one, such as fundraiser dinners for an overseas cause, but now through the use of social media a new form of awareness is also building among local populations. Before the advent of easy communication, it had been easy for people in an area affected by war, famine, or disease to feel as if they were alone in their struggles. Now, however, through the tools of the internet, these people hear more and more voices of those in the same predicament, leading to the formation of aid networks, and eventually even branching out to form new, domestic organizations dedicated to fighting for a solution (FisherKeller, 2011, 50). Of course, the rise of social media was not the start of such efforts, before the technological infrastructure developed it had been much more difficult to keep a large group cohesive enough long enough to affect change (FisherKeller, 2011, 51).

The role of the new media in such cases cannot be overstated. While at first efforts in the Middle-East focused on supporting communities to improve their quality of life, it did not take long before actual political activities manifested. New media, social media, and how these connect with young people in particular has gotten an even more intense look with the Arab Spring. The initial sparks of many of the Middle-Eastern revolutions were published in traditional media, but the movements did not gain real traction until young bloggers and

“cyberactivists” started driving the stories forward (Khondker 2011, 676). Recently young women in Saudi Arabia have also been using social media to organize protest events against their government's ban on women driving (Khondker 2011, 677). Even in more economically developed and politically free countries, youth have taken to the streets during the recent recession, in large part thanks to the organizing power of the internet (Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, and Flammini 2013, 1). The power behind well motivated young people coupled with modern electronic communication is making a real, tangible impact. The question still remains, however, of whether this increase in activism comes with a corresponding increase in participation in the more traditional outlets for political expression such as voting.

Connecting with previous studies on party identification, there has been a recent surge in studies on how children learn about politics in relation to the educational system as compared to in their home environment (Clawson and Oxley 2013, 45). Studies have found that young children, through socialization at school and learning about civics, broadly tend to have a positive image of politics and rate figures such as the President as “the best person in the world,” holding the person in the office on an exaggerated pedestal (Clawson and Oxley 2013, 45). A key change occurs as the children mature into young adults, however, and even by junior high school differences in opinion based on economic standing, race, and gender all start to emerge. For example, when a poverty stricken area of Kentucky is compared with a more well off suburb of Chicago, a nearly 40% drop in presidential approval rating occurs among those in the poverty stricken area, compared to figures remaining in the high 70 percentile range for those in the more economically advantaged area (Clawson and Oxley 2013, 48). Combined with traditional parental influence, the overall conditions of a region and the media that area absorbs starts

influencing potential voters years before they actually come of age (Clawson and Oxley 2013, 49). Thus, both of those sources can be seen as factors that can divide an age group and prevent an overall age-based political mindset from forming.

Another recent trend in research takes advantage of the end of the Cold War. Much has been said about how young people in former communist countries were reacting to the change in governmental system, as the group's reaction could be markedly different from those who were older (Youniss and Levine 2009, 3). The 1990s saw many elections across Eastern Europe with unpredictable results. Partially the surprising results could be attributed to an inexperienced electorate, and politicians equally inexperienced with proper behavior in a democratic form of government (Sikorski 1996, 19). Also a factor though was that while youthful enthusiasm was quite helpful in pushing against the communist ruling class in the past, when some of the same people attempted to actually lead the same skill set did not apply to both tasks. This led to further disillusionment and the desire for more experienced leaders, which in turn saw political parties that might not otherwise be elected by ideology gain power as voters search for any form of competency (Sikorski 1996, 20). Confirming what really happened may be difficult, and take even more time, but undeniably youth political action played some role.

Some research also focuses on the methods used by youth protestors rather than any potential relation to traditional political activity. For example, one study noticed that both the Occupy Wall Street protestors and the Arab Spring protestors made use of humor differently in their public communications and press releases (Hassan 2013, 551). In the analysis the study's author finds that to many, humor is an easy form of resistance to a social order, and that can appeal to young political activists making their first major forays into the political world (Hassan

2013, 556). In Egypt the people had little to fight with, so turned to what they could. In the occupy protests, however, the protestors' situation was much less dire (Hassan 2013, 556). Despite the similar age of these two groups, the different situations resulted in two different approaches that cannot be explained by scope alone. To an outside observer with absolutely no context, the levels of seriousness in each protest could lead one to believe that the Occupy protesters were in a much more dangerous situation from the way they presented themselves (Hassan 2013, 556). Whatever the reasons may be, this research presents key evidence that as a global whole, youth political behavior is not necessarily consistent.

Also of note in this regard is that at the same time as this wave of youth political activism, some places like Europe are seeing a decrease in youth voting turnout (Sloam 2013, 387). The voting rates there are not fundamentally different than the previously established norm, despite participation in the global Occupy protests (Sloam 2013, 387). By comparison, youth turnout in America is up, as previously stated (Cherry 2012, 481). Turnout has become a key focal point being actively studied as a result. Some researchers are looking at the fact that while overall young people vote at a much lower rate than the rest of the electorate, there is a high correlation between registered voters and those that actually vote (Cherry 2012, 481). Thus, those researchers argue, the way to increase youth participation in politics is to employ more resources to register voters young (Cherry 2012, 481). Other research once again refers back how children are socialized from a young age. Instead of focusing on the political views one is exposed to young, or the views of one's parents, this research looks at political engagement (Pacheco 2008, 417). In this context, the important factor seems to be engagement in rational discussion, rather than any exposure to political messages in general (Pacheco 2008, 417). The

question is complex, influenced by many factors, but in a way voter turnout is often seen to be at the root of political participation, and perhaps more important than any specific beliefs held by the group.

The goal of this research project is to fill a key gap the current literature by putting young voters into the overall political participation framework and analyzing what issues may be a driving factor behind the increase in this demographic's turnout. In this case, what the young demographic tends to believe on a certain issue is not as important as whether or not the members indicate that a particular issue is especially important to them. Most people can probably give an opinion on any issue posed to them, but very few will actually act on every issue. What this study is primarily searching for is what issues can be credited with for the increase in action. Issue positions, however, can provide fertile ground for secondary analysis. It is quite possible that a specific issue only energizes portions of the youth that feel one way, while those that feel the other way are not likely to act based on their opinion. In fact, merely finding such divides could also provide crucial analysis in locating divides within the demographic that could prove more important to consider than viewing the entirety of young voters as a single whole in some areas.

### **Chapter 3. Methodology**

To accomplish the project's goal, an anonymous survey was sent out to the Eastern Illinois University student population that asked questions regarding political opinions and the strength of opinion on various currently spotlighted political issues. Eastern has a diverse student body, so a variety of student backgrounds can be taken into account. The survey was not limited to just young voters, but results were filtered by age group, with various subsets of the data being useful for comparison across age groups.

The first step in conducting the survey was to get approval to conduct research using human participants. To do this approval from the Institutional Review Board was required. As this project was an anonymous survey, with guaranteed confidentiality, it was exempt from many of the procedures other research may be required to do involving safety. Other procedures were observed involving data security and organization as to prevent any respondent's survey responses as being traceable back to them. No names or identifying information were collected.

The survey was created online using software called Qualtrics. Qualtrics offers a suite of tools for data collection and analysis, but is not as advanced enough for analysis to fully replace SPSS, which was used as well. Qualtrics provided a place to host the questions that was easily accessible to potential respondents, and at the same time maintained confidentiality standards. Distribution was handled by Eastern's own Information Technology Services (ITS) department. ITS assisted by generating a random list of 2000 students and emailing them a link which would direct them to Qualtrics to complete the questions. This method produced 376 completed surveys, which is roughly an 18.8% response rate.

The wording and topics covered by the main body of the questions were based on

existing survey work that is generally accepted as sound, using Gallup as a model. For example, a poll was covered on the Gallup website on October 22, 2013 that asked the question to survey takers “Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal, or not?” and provided the options of “No, not legal” or “Yes, legal” (Swift 2013)<sup>1</sup>. A key inspiration also occurred from finding an option sometimes included that let respondents select “no opinion” as an option, as can be seen on this survey report about age and opinion about internet taxation (Brown 2013)<sup>2</sup>. The scope of the project made a broad survey more ideal because it would allow more issues to be analyzed. Therefore, while these questions served as the base, the questions were also adapted to provide a larger range of answers, in the same format but of differing intensity, than the model.

At the same time, because the target audience may not normally be inclined to answer surveys, the number of questions was kept to a minimum to reduce time and energy commitment required, which would hopefully increase the total number of completed surveys. As such, while complex opinions on specific policy initiatives were not surveyed, eleven general areas that can each represent a specific subset of policy were included in the questionnaire. The areas surveyed were gay marriage, drinking age, abortion, food assistance, education assistance, foreign aid, human rights based intervention in foreign countries, marijuana, immigration, gun control, and environmental issues. The complete survey with exact wording is included in Appendix A.

For most questions respondents were given a Likert scale to rank their stance on an issue as strongly supporting, supporting, no opinion, opposing, or strongly opposing a given issue.

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<http://www.gallup.com/poll/165539/first-time-americans-favor-legalizing-marijuana.aspx>

2 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163184/americans-especially-young-oppose-internet-sales-tax.aspx>



Sometimes the nature of the policy area necessitated slight wording changes or morphing the question to address the budget for said area within the overall framework of government. This was done in an effort to maintain neutrality within the questions and avoid biasing the respondents towards one answer or another, because some issues are particularly prone to eliciting quick judgments without deeper thought as typically portrayed.

Respondents were also given the option of indicating that they did not feel knowledgeable enough about a given subject to make an informed judgment. This was done to give the respondent a “way out” if they were truly unable to choose another answer on a question, and thus prevent the rest of the data from being corrupted by answers that were perhaps not the best reflection of what the survey taker intended. While this option may seem similar to the “no opinion” option, the crucial difference is in the attitude behind the answer. One can be well informed about an issue, but care not one way or the other for a particular outcome. This state of mind is quite different from refusing to take a side because one does not feel as if they could make an adequate judgment.

A primary focus was given to one crucial question at the end. Respondents were asked which issues those surveyed stated would make them more likely to turn out to vote on Election Day. This question produced a series of issues ranked as highly important to the respondents that can also easily be filtered by party identification and also stance on the issue, as well as compared with data on the entire voting age population's stances and motivational levels. From there, each individual issue can be examined as it relates to the demographic as a whole, and how it relates to factors such as gender or party identification. Once a complete picture has been formed from this analysis, it is reasonably easy to highlight any issues that are either highly

motivational or the exact opposite across the demographic universally. Conversely, it is also easy to spot any issues where there is a sharp divide within the demographic, which would mean that on that issue some factor other than age is influencing the respondents.

The last question on the survey was to gauge a different type of voter motivation. It asked the respondents whether they would be more likely to vote for a candidate that agrees with them or against a candidate that disagrees with them. Though not tied to individual issues as the previous question is, this question can be used to partially determine the youth demographic's reaction to positive campaigning techniques versus negative campaigning techniques. A person can only act on motivation if they have an outlet. Just as important as finding out what issues are driving forward the youth vote is finding out whether the movement is based on a positive or negative view of politics.

This method has both merits and flaws. Survey work has shown in the past that respondents tend to over-report. An overall higher level of political participation is typically recorded when people are confronted about their activities than what data on actual participation is checked. In other words, there is a definite gap between reported results and reality. Measurement issues are one of the biggest problems faced when answering questions related to political participation (Niemi, Weisberg, and Kimball 2011, 23). In this survey, the risk is twofold because not only are survey takers asked the standard questions about their opinions, they are directly challenged about what motivates them to participate, giving the respondent a second possible way to over-report when the two separate statistics are taken together later in the analysis.

There is an important benefit, however, to analyzing this problem from this angle. Even

with results potentially skewed by over reporting, there is a certain quality of directly asking potential voters their opinions that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, over reporting tends to occur most often on activities that require action, such as actually voting (Niemi, Weisberg, and Kimball 2011, 31). Stating one's opinion in an anonymous survey does not have a bias of effort depending on the response, and neither does stating that an issue is an important issue. By merely taking the survey, anyone answering the questions has already crossed the activity barrier that makes responses about physical participation skewed.

## Chapter 4. Findings

A summary of the survey results can be found in Table 1, Table 2, and Tables 3.1-3.12. Table 1 is the demographic information of the survey takers. Table 2 shows the overall breakdown of issue importance and issue importance sub-divided by age group. Tables 3.1-3.12 provide a simplification of the stances on each of the issues, also including total and a breakdown by age groupings. These tables also include the question involving whether or not agreement with a leading candidate influences a voter's motivation.

When discussing the rest of the analysis there are several things that need to be kept in mind. Firstly, 77 of the respondents, or 21% of the total, are over the age of 25. The data they provided provides a good sample to compare the younger respondents against. There are a few concerns regarding the older sample, but those concerns will be discussed as they arise, issue by issue. Secondly, though the main focus of the research is on what is motivating the younger respondents, at times their stance will be used to support primary findings, or the two have interacted in such a way to expose a secondary finding. Also, when a particular issue shows an even level of importance across all demographics, the effect might be a result of that issue having special focus in the media spotlight at the moment.

When the results are compiled, there are three key issues that show a clear connection between a potential voter's age and how likely the issue is to be self-reported as an important issue. The first issue, and the one that shows the strongest connection, is gay marriage. The connection can be seen on Table 2. This is also perhaps the least surprising find, as for the most part it is one of the talking points the media likes to bring up in relation to youth voting. Likewise, the survey results report, as seen on Table 3.1 that 67% of those under 25 support

legalizing gay marriage to one degree or another, which is also in line with most media reporting (Gallup 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

The second issue that has a linkage to age is the legality of abortion. In some ways this issue could be seen as “piggybacking” on of the gay marriage issue, but in this case those surveyed had a much more even spread of opinion. As seen in Table 3.3, 52% of respondents could be classified as pro-choice as opposed to 39% who could be classified as pro-life, a much smaller gap than with the previously discussed split on gay marriage. Still, as an issue in the social sphere, this finding could be seen as consistent with the previously theorized predictions on young voters' values.

The last issue that showed significant positive connection between youth and issue importance was gun control. For this issue, though, as seen in Table 2 the connection was rather weak, and could even run into problems with being in the margin of error at certain points, or at least being only a partial explanation at a very specific age range. As such, several other factors must be considered in an analysis of the survey results on gun control. First, overall gun control was rated as a highly important issue for politics today. Still looking at Table 2, it was rated number three in the overall list of issues facing voters today, with 57% of all respondents stating that they felt it was an important issue to them, either for or against gun control. With a high response rate such as that, it is possible that any age based connection is simply lost within an overall spike in the general population's emphasis on that issue, cause by any number of possible factors such as current events or media coverage. For a better analysis a survey would have to be conducted again at a different time when gun control was not such a controversial issue.

The fact that gun control is an issue that has received much recent media attention is also

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3 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1651/Gay-Lesbian-Rights.aspx>

a great segue to an aspect of some previous models that suggest issues that are important when one is developing their political consciousness will continue to remain important for those individuals throughout their life. Related research on the matter is actually one of the areas previous studies were highly interested in, such as examining continuing anti-war sentiments in Vietnam War protesters (Miller 1992, 340). While this effect would, of course, affect all issues, when gun control is compared against gay marriage, for instance, the difference in degrees of importance is enough that the effect cannot be said to be the dominant driving factor for both. The important thing to consider when incorporating that model is the implication that some issues are not necessarily inherently important to an age demographic based on that group's values, or not even necessarily their overall experience, but because an issue was widely talked about by the general public at the time the group first engaged in politics. In essence, an issue can be reinforced into a group's consciousness by coincidence.

Most issues do not appear to have an age-based connection. While all three issues that had a connection can be broadly categorized as “social issues”, and both the existing research and the media claim that social issues seem to be the most important issues to today's young voters, the survey results show that not all social issues resonated strongly. For instance, marijuana legalization, an issue frequently touted as something today's young people are pushing for, showed no connection between age and respondents identifying the issue as a particularly important one, as seen on Table 2. Also, as seen in Table 3.8, while 67% of those surveyed under 25 years of age said they were in favor of marijuana legalization in some form, the percent of those over 25 who agreed, 68%, was not statistically different. Only about a third of those under 25 said the issue was a very important question society needed to deal with. Furthermore, those

specifically 23 to 25 years of age were the most likely to say the issue was important, topping out around 40%, with those in either direction less likely to mark the issue as important. Therefore, while it may be correct to assume that today's young people are in favor of marijuana legalization, most people overall can have the same statement made about them. When the issue is placed in a broader political context, the issue cannot be said to drive youth political participation either, or is at least not as big a factor as the previously mentioned issues.

There are other issues that can also be said to have a somewhat surprisingly lack of age-based connection. The issue of raising or lowering the drinking age is a good example. There is a noted spike of those under 21 stating that they feel the issue is important, close to 40%, before the general response rate levels out a little above 20%. However, the numbers do not make a smooth curve down. Table 2 makes the lack of a trend clearly visible. The over 25 demographic shows a slight increase in marking the issue as important. Using Table 3.2 to factor in the possibility of overall differing opinions leading to that selection does not explain the second uptick, as the demographics did not report substantially different opinions on the matter. If anything, the issue shows more of a connection based on opposition to lowering the drinking age, not support. In that case, there is a trend of older respondents being more opposed than younger respondents. Only by switching the analysis to the opposition side does this connection become apparent that the traditional analysis would miss. As a final consideration on the issue, only 26% of people overall marked the drinking age as important to them, so perhaps the issue is also below some sort of threshold of political activity to be meaningful to the population at large, even a segment that would seem to have a vested interest in supporting it.

Some issues that were given a high overall importance by respondents still did not show

an expected trend either, though. Education assistance is another issue that the young demographic could be expected to have a vested interest in. As seen in Table 2, the overall level of issue importance was reported at around 63% overall, making it the second most highly rated issue by importance. When looking at the responses by age, however, the level is mostly just consistent, with a noted spike for the 23-25 year old age group. One obvious distorting factor could be that this is the age group that is typically graduating, and thus is just about to start repaying student loans. The opinion results as recorded in Table 3.5 do indeed show that this age group is somewhat more likely to favor subsidized education over student loan options than the other groups. Meanwhile, society as a whole could agree that the issue is important, maintaining a steady level of issue importance in survey responses despite the temporary situation of this specific demographic. Another explanation could be that, while a significant number of people over 25 did respond to the survey, because all who answered were students, all are well aware of education assistance issues, more so than a sample drawn from the entire population base. This is one issue that probably needs more research. Future studies should specifically use a survey pool that includes non-students for a sample that adequately represents a more average baseline opinion on the matter. It is quite possible that the issue has just been thrust into the national consciousness to such a high degree that no age-based connection can be found, but more study will be needed to say for sure.

The remaining issues surveyed do not show a particular relation to age. The only one that even comes close is food assistance, which actually might show that younger people are less likely to care about the issue than older people, but the results in Table 2 do not show enough of a slope to be conclusive. Furthermore the issue is not very highly rated overall as important,



only 31% of respondents selecting it as such. Environmental issues, which are sometimes seen as being of more important to younger people, showed an equal level of importance among all the demographics, near the middle of the list as reported by Table 2. Immigration showed an overall high level of importance on the same list, while foreign affairs took a low priority slot, both for foreign aid and on the question of human rights based intervention in foreign countries.

Apart from issue importance and issue stances, the last question on the survey dealt with whether or not a respondent would be more encouraged to vote for a frontrunner that agrees with them or against one that disagrees with them on a hot button issue. The results of this question can be seen in Table 3.12. The age groups do not line up as cleanly as in some of the other analysis, but there does seem to be a pattern. The particularly young age groups, those ranging from 17-23, seem to prefer voting for candidates that agree with them. As respondents age, they do not necessarily become more likely to vote against a candidate that disagrees with them, but instead indicate that it is not as big a motivating factor. Perhaps this means that older voters are more likely to consider more than one issue at a time when selecting which candidate to vote for, while younger voters are more likely to focus on one issue that is particularly important to them. Based on this one question, however, there is not really enough data to make a determination one way or the other. This is another subject that could use substantial future research.

## Chapter 5. Conclusion

To bring the project full circle, it can be said without a doubt that there are indeed issues that young voters find more important than the other age groups. Furthermore, the media speculation stating that young voters seem to have a preferential passion for social issues can also be said to be correct, but not necessarily in the expected way, or even in broad strokes. The main finding that could have been predicted is that young people do indeed find the issue of gay marriage to be important. Abortion can possibly be seen as a related issue in that prediction.

When it comes to the third issue however, gun control, the eventual connection does not seem to be one that had strong evidence for being predicted. While there is no doubt that gun control is a rather large item in the national spot light at this time, the fact that young voters in particular would want to take it up as a cause is an important facet this study brings to the table. One possible explanation for this phenomenon can be found in existing literature on the subject of party identification. In the past that young adults have had a tendency to identify with their parents' political leanings at the time they are entering into political awareness (Niemi and Jennings 1991, 971). It is also possible that issues that have high public awareness at this critical time are adopted by an age group as an important issue more so than omnipresent issues. The same studies also found that issue importance and position sometimes did not connect to party identification, and that it was still fluid into the average citizen's late 20s (Niemi and Jennings 1991, 971). Generational differences in issue opinion could be observed, and that some issues did seem to cement for certain groups as more important than others, with a potential connection to events that took place during that group's early voting socialization (Miller 1992, 340). This work would seem to indicate that the ongoing discussion on gun control now will firmly place

the issue in this generation's political consciousness enough that actual ongoing events will have a diminished impact.

While the findings on these three issues that show a connection are of course important to the study of youth political behavior, the lack of connection on some social issues is also an important finding. Particularly the lack of an age-based connection on marijuana issue importance seems to defy the popular perception of young voters (Martin 2014). The same can be said of the results on the subject of the drinking age. At the least, the results demonstrate that not all social issues are equal when it comes to attracting the attention of young voters.

The findings on education assistance deserve extra attention in particular, too. It is perhaps the most visible economic issue young voters. Not only is there a logical connection to young voters and the issue due to their self-interest in attending higher education at this point in life, but the issue was one raised repeatedly by recent youth movements such as Occupy Wall Street (Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, and Flammini 2013, 2). These signs would seem to suggest there would be a connection between age and considering education assistance important. While it is quite possible that this survey is correct in finding no connection, in retrospect there is also quite a good case to be made that on this one issue the results may be skewed. The fact that all surveyed were students, even those over 25, could artificially raise the reported level of issue importance among older voters. It is also possible that the issue simply is held in very high importance by the general public, and that older voters are united with the young in this matter. Without diminishing the other results, further study in this area, perhaps either as a large case study on the issue using existing research, or somehow using a national survey, would not be entirely uncalled for in verifying this survey's results on this issue.

Overall the method still seems sound, aside from this one discrepancy in expected results. As mentioned previously, some degree of verification, where possible and appropriate, was undertaken. The “select all that apply” approach to self-reporting issue importance seems to have produced a solid data set that allows for a wide range of cross tabulations to be made. Unlike other studies that may force participants to make hard choices that in the end will not actually reflect their feelings, this method offered a large degree of freedom. Each issue was thusly able to be judged on its own scale of 0 to 100 as to how important the respondents judge it to be. The scale can either then be taken as a whole or sorted into other sub-demographics. The option exists to view the data by party identification, gender, race, or a host of other factors.

Going forward, sorting the data in these ways is one of two major paths to proceed. The data set has been analyzed as a whole by age, but further helpful findings can be made if smaller groups are looked at. For instance, the difference in opinion and issue importance between young men and women can be analyzed next to see if there is any significant difference. The other major possibility is bringing the actual opinions of whether or not someone is for or against a certain policy into the analysis. At times those opinions were touched on in this analysis to try and explain some of the subtle nuances of the conclusions, but a wealth of findings can also be made by giving those opinions more focus. Questions can be discussed regarding age and the strength of one's opinion, and the questions were typically worded in a way to allow the respondents to express the degree of their support or opposition. Simpler still, an analysis could be done examining if support or opposition rises or falls with age, as this analysis focused on combining both strong feelings for support and opposition into one metric without regard to direction.

In summary, the survey results provide a few good findings that are worth discussion within the discipline, but the framework laid by the research also serves the purpose well of providing a launching point for further study. The immediate findings have practical value here and now, providing assistance in predicting and modeling future elections as well as assist with outreach to the young voter demographic. These models can only continue to improve through following up the leads provided by this survey. The data and analysis technique are sound enough to continue to take this type of analysis to the logical conclusion, and the potential is far from tapped.

**Table 1 - Demographics**

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Are you male or female?					
Male	28 (30%)	41 (27%)	17 (33%)	33 (43%)	119 (32%)
Female	64 (70%)	111 (73%)	34 (67%)	44 (57%)	253 (68%)
With what ethnicity do you identify?					
White, non-hispanic	72 (77%)	136 (89%)	44 (86%)	67 (87%)	319 (86%)
African-American	13 (14%)	7 (5%)	3 (6%)	3 (4%)	26 (7%)
Hispanic	3 (3%)	2 (1%)	1 (2%)	2 (3%)	8 (2%)
Other	5 (5%)	7 (5%)	3 (6%)	5 (6%)	20 (5%)
What year are you in at EIU?					
Freshman	60 (66%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	60 (16%)
Sophomore	23 (25)	13 (9%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	38 (10%)
Junior	8 (9%)	45 (30%)	4 (8%)	14 (18%)	71 (19%)
Senior	0 (0%)	78 (51%)	16 (31%)	28 (36%)	122 (33%)
Graduate Student	0 (0%)	16 (11%)	31 (61%)	33 (43%)	80 (22%)
Generally speaking, do you identify yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent, Other, or...					
Democrat	39 (42%)	51 (34%)	21 (41%)	17 (22%)	128 (34%)
Republican	26 (28%)	49 (32%)	9 (18%)	22 (29%)	106 (28%)
Independent	8 (9%)	18 (12%)	6 (12%)	9 (12%)	41 (11%)
Other	5 (5%)	11 (7%)	2 (4%)	10 (13%)	28 (8%)
No Preference	15 (16%)	23 (15%)	13 (25%)	19 (25%)	70 (19%)
Have you previously voted in an election?					
Yes	39 (42%)	115 (76%)	43 (84%)	72 (94%)	269 (72%)
No	11 (12%)	37 (24%)	8 (16%)	5 (6%)	61 (16%)
Not eligible in previous elections	43 (46%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	43 (12%)
Total N for age groups					
	93 (25%)	152 (41%)	51 (14%)	77 (21%)	373 (100%)



**Table 2: Issue Importance**

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Gay Marriage	67 (72%)	98 (66%)	31 (63%)	39 (53%)	235 (64%)
Education Assistance	58 (62%)	91 (61%)	35 (71%)	45 (61%)	229 (63%)
Gun Control	56 (60%)	85 (57%)	27 (55%)	40 (54%)	208 (57%)
Abortion	53 (57%)	86 (58%)	24 (49%)	28 (38%)	191 (52%)
The Environment	41 (44%)	76 (51%)	24 (49%)	33 (45%)	174 (48%)
Immigration	39 (42%)	61 (41%)	20 (41%)	31 (42%)	150 (41%)
Food Assistance	22 (24%)	48 (32%)	17 (35%)	25 (34%)	112 (31%)
Human Rights Intervention	29 (31%)	47 (32%)	12 (24%)	19 (26%)	107 (29%)
Marijuana	27 (29%)	37 (25%)	20 (51%)	18 (24%)	102 (28%)
Drinking Age	33 (35%%)	35 (23%)	10 (20%)	18 (24%)	96 (26%)
Foreign Aid	21 (23%)	34 (23%)	10 (20%)	22 (30%)	87 (24%)
None of the Above	4 (4%)	12 (8%)	5 (10%)	11 (15%)	32 (9%)
Total	93 (100%)	152 (100%)	51 (100%)	77 (100%)	373 (100%)



### Survey Results

Special Note: The total N for the age groups for all charts is as follows.

17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25
93	152	51	77

Table 3.1

Do you support or oppose gay marriage?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Support	60 (65%)	108 (71%)	36 (70%)	46 (60%)	240 (67%)
Oppose	23 (25%)	27 (18%)	10 (20%)	24 (31%)	84 (23%)

Table 3.2

Do you support or oppose decreasing the drinking age to 18?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Support	29 (32%)	44 (29%)	14 (28%)	18 (23%)	105 (28%)
Oppose	42 (45%)	78 (52%)	27 (52%)	49 (64%)	196 (53%)

Table 3.3

Do you think abortion should be legal or illegal in most cases?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Legal	49 (53%)	72 (47%)	31 (61%)	42 (54%)	194 (52%)
Illegal	35 (38%)	65 (43%)	14 (28%)	27 (35%)	141 (37%)

Table 3.4

If you had control over the federal budget, would you increase food assistance program spending, decrease food assistance program spending, or keep spending levels the same?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Increase	5 (5%)	31 (20%)	13 (25%)	12 (16%)	61 (16%)
Decrease	39 (42%)	50 (33%)	18 (35%)	28 (36%)	135 (36%)
Keep Same	16 (17%)	26 (17%)	7 (14%)	19 (26%)	68 (18%)

Table 3.5

Do you think the government should provide more free education opportunities for students from a low income background, or that student loans are a better alternative?

n17-19	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Free Education	31 (33%)	42 (28%)	18 (35%)	21 (27%)	112 (30%)
Loans	14 (15%)	23 (15%)	7 (14%)	13 (17%)	57 (15%)

Table 3.6

If you had control over the federal budget, would you increase foreign aid spending, decrease foreign aid spending, or keep spending levels the same?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Increase	6 (6%)	8 (5%)	2 (4%)	1 (1%)	17 (5%)
Decrease	47 (51%)	80 (53%)	26 (52%)	54 (70%)	207 (56%)
Keep Same	14 (15%)	22 (14%)	7 (14%)	11 (25%)	54 (15%)

Table 3.7

Do you believe the United States should intervene in other countries to prevent human rights violations?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Yes/Sometimes	65 (70%)	101 (67%)	37 (72%)	58 (75%)	261 (70%)
No	18 (19%)	29 (19%)	7 (14%)	16 (21%)	70 (19%)

Table 3.8

Do you believe marijuana should be legal or illegal?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Legal	35 (38%)	69 (45%)	31 (61%)	33 (43%)	168 (45%)
Medical Use Only	26 (28%)	27 (18%)	8 (16%)	19 (25%)	80 (21%)
Illegal	24 (26%)	40 (26%)	4 (8%)	21 (27%)	89 (24%)

Table 3.9

What change to US immigration policy, if any, do you favor?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Deportation	25 (27%)	33 (22%)	5 (10%)	28 (36%)	91 (24%)
Some Form of Amnesty	42 (45%)	79 (52%)	35 (71%)	37 (48%)	194 (52%)
No change	1 (1%)	3 (2%)	1 (2%)	5 (6%)	10 (3%)

Table 3.10  
 What change to US gun control policy, if any, do you favor?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Stricter Bans	11 (12%)	21 (14%)	6 (12%)	7 (9%)	45 (12%)
Owner Database	53 (57%)	89 (59%)	23 (46%)	45 (48%)	210 (56%)
Less Restrictions	10 (11%)	11 (7%)	6 (12%)	16 (21%)	43 (12%)
No change	7 (8%)	11 (7%)	4 (8%)	6 (8%)	28 (8%)

Table 3.11  
 Do you believe environmental or business concerns are more important?  
 Table 3.9  
 What change to US immigration policy, if any, do you favor?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Environmental	28 (30%)	56 (37%)	14 (27%)	18 (23%)	116 (36%)
Business	12 (13%)	13 (9%)	0 (0%)	5 (6%)	30 (8%)
Equal Importance	48 (52%)	71 (47%)	30 (59%)	53 (69%)	202 (54%)

Table 3.12  
 Are you more likely to vote in an election where the frontrunner agrees with you on a hot button issue or where the frontrunner disagrees with you?

	17-19	20-22	23-25	Over 25	Total
Agrees	50 (54%)	77 (51%)	13 (25%)	29 (38%)	169 (45%)
Disagrees	7 (8%)	14 (9%)	8 (16%)	3 (4%)	32 (9%)
Does Not Matter	23 (25%)	47 (31%)	20 (40%)	38 (50%)	128 (34%)

## Appendix—Survey Questions

### Demographics

1. What is your current age?
  - a. 17-19
  - b. 20-22
  - c. 23-24
  - d. Over 25
  
2. Are you male or female?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  
3. With what ethnicity do you identify?
  - a. White, non-Hispanic
  - b. African-American
  - c. Hispanic
  - d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What year are you in at EIU?
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  - e. Graduate Student

### Political Questions

Generally speaking, do you identify yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, and Independent, Other, or have no preference?

- a. Democrat
  - b. Republican
  - c. Independent
  - d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. No Preference
- 
5. Have you previously voted in an election?
    - a. Yes

- b. No
- c. No, I was not eligible in any previous elections

**Issue Questions**

6. Do you support or oppose legalizing gay marriage?
  - a. Strongly support
  - b. Support
  - c. No opinion
  - d. Oppose
  - e. Strongly oppose
  - f. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide
  
7. Do you support oppose decreasing the drinking age to 18?
  - a. Strongly support
  - b. Support
  - c. No opinion
  - d. Oppose
  - e. Strongly oppose
  - f. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide
  
8. Do you think abortion should be legal or illegal in most cases?
  - a. Legal in all cases
  - b. Usually legal
  - c. No opinion
  - d. Usually illegal
  - e. Illegal in all cases
  - f. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide
  
9. If you had control over the federal budget, would you increase food assistance program spending, decrease food assistance program spending, or keep spending levels the same?
  - a. Increase spending
  - b. Decrease spending
  - c. Keep same spending level
  - d. No opinion
  - e. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide

10. Do you think that the government should provide more free education opportunities for students from a low income background, or that student loans are a better alternative?
  - a. Government should provide more free education opportunities for low income students
  - b. Student loans are sufficient for everyone's educational needs
  - c. A combination of both systems should be used
  - d. No opinion
  - e. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide
  
11. If you had control over the federal budget, would you increase foreign aid spending, decrease foreign aid spending, or keep spending levels the same?
  - a. Increase spending
  - b. Decrease spending
  - c. Keep same spending level
  - d. No opinion
  - e. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide
  
12. Do you believe that the United States should intervene in other countries to prevent human rights violations?
  - a. The United States should intervene in other countries to prevent human rights violations.
  - b. The United States should only intervene in other countries to prevent human rights violations in serious cases.
  - c. The United States should not intervene in other countries to prevent human rights violations.
  - d. No opinion
  - e. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide
  
13. Do you believe marijuana use should be legal or illegal?
  - a. Legal
  - b. Legal only for medical uses
  - c. Illegal
  - d. No opinion
  - e. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide

14. What change to US immigration policy do you favor, if any?
- a. Deportation of illegal immigrants
  - b. Path to citizenship programs
  - c. Immediate amnesty
  - d. The United States immigration policy does not need to be changed
  - e. No opinion
  - f. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide



15. What change to US gun control policy do you favor, if any?

- a. Ban all firearms from private ownership
- b. Ban handguns
- c. Ban all non-hunting firearms
- d. Institute a national background check system/firearms owner database
- e. Gun control policy is fine as it is
- f. All firearms should be legal
- g. No opinion
- h. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide

16. Do you believe environmental or business concerns are more important?

- a. Business concerns are more important.
- b. Environmental concerns are more important.
- c. Both are equally important.
- d. No Opinion
- e. I do not feel informed enough on this issue to decide

### **Participation Questions**

15. Of the previous issues, if a candidate took a strong stance in either direction on that topic, would you be more likely to participate in an election? (Check all that apply)

- a. Gay Marriage
- b. Drinking Age
- c. Abortion
- d. Food Assistance
- e. Education Assistance
- f. Foreign Aid
- g. Human rights intervention
- h. Marijuana
- i. Immigration
- j. Gun Control
- k. The Environment
- l. None of the above

16. Are you more likely to vote in an election where the frontrunner agrees with you on a hot button issue or where the frontrunner disagrees with you.
- a. Candidate agrees
  - b. Candidate disagrees
  - c. Does not matter
  - d. Uncertain

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