

Social Connectivity and the Youth Vote: Comparing Youth Voter Turnout in 1992 & 2008

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Abstract

Traditional paradigms of what causes youth (18-29) to vote fail to explain youth voter turnout in the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Social connectivity may be able to overcome the deficiencies of the traditional concepts, namely that youth vote when an election is extraordinarily hyped or a policy area is particularly salient, and thus improve the ability to predict youth political behavior at the ballot box. Where social connectivity includes indicators that measure an individual's relationship with his/her immediate community, such indicators need to be adapted for the more transient youth population. Thus, this paper considered employment status, marital status, and religious service attendance as the basis for the social connectivity measurement. The elections of 1992 and 2008 are not only similar in policy considerations and candidate profiles, but evaluating youth voter turnout from these two elections allowed for a measurement of social connectivity over two different generations, Generation X and the Millennials who make up the largest generation in U.S. history. Understanding what a typical youth voter looks like today is crucial to better understanding what form political behavior will take in the 21st century.

Keywords: Youth, Vote, Voter Turnout, Millennial

1. Introduction

Bill Clinton in 1992 was credited for revitalizing a crippled Democratic Party when he won the presidency. His charismatic personality coupled with infamous appearances on MTV and his response to his preferred type of underwear sparked a revolution in presidential campaigning wherein the youth vote was heavily courted. The youth vote had long been neglected due to historically low turnout, only topping 50% in the first election after the voting age was lowered to include 18-20 year olds before 1992. The Clinton campaign was lauded for reaching out to youth voters and inviting them to join the political process. It did not hurt that when the youth did show up in record numbers, that they voted favorably for Clinton.

Barack Obama's campaign employed a similar tactic in 2008 in his successful bid for the White House. Once again, over 50% of youth voters cast their ballots, the first time since Clinton's revolutionary campaign. Obama was credited as being youthful, charming, and inspiring to young Millennials. What was unique about these two men that caused the youth to cast votes in record numbers? Was it their charming personalities or the competitive nature of their respective campaigns? Or was it simply their campaign strategists picking up on the keys to youth voter behavior?

I believe that social connectivity is the best indicator for youth turnout. The Clinton and Obama campaigns won because they identified this trait and aggressively targeted the youth most likely to be socially connected, thereby ensuring that the youth more likely to vote would cast their vote for the Democratic candidate for president. I will show that as the rate of social connectivity among youth voters increases, so does the overall rate of youth voter turnout. I will also show that social connectivity has declined generationally from Generation X to the Millennial generation, thus accounting for the slight decline in voter turnout from 1992 to 2008. This would run counter to the

traditional paradigm that youth only vote in an election that is competitive or interesting. I believe youth voters are not as shallow as the traditional paradigm in youth political behavior research suggests.

2. Literature Review

Political scientists have previously proposed theories to explain the variation of youth voter turnout that can be categorized into three groups. The first of these groups houses theories that focus on the transient nature of college students. The argument goes that because youth typically do not have a permanent residence established, the costs associated with voting are more significant than the potential benefits they could enjoy. William Flanigan and Nancy Zingale explain, “Military service, geographic mobility with the possible failure to meet residence requirements, the additional hurdle of registration – all create barriers to voting for the young that are less likely to affect older voters.”¹ A lack of residential stability precludes youth from allocating sufficient time to become knowledgeable of the various topics and procedures necessary to vote.² These youth are also less likely to care about political issues, particularly those of a local nature, as they are more focused on eliminating the cause of their mobility. Typically, this involves an intense focus on completing higher levels of education, finding career employment, completing military service, beginning a family, and becoming financially secure to qualify for home ownership. All of these concerns can be considered paramount to youth citizens, thus causing them to disregard any serious consideration to political questions.

While the transient nature of youth certainly can play a role in a general ignorance of voting procedures, I do not believe it is a major deterrent to youth voter turnout. In the information age, youth are particularly savvy at finding instructions on everything from basic car repair to stain removal. Surely, if youth were sufficiently motivated to vote, they would encounter little resistance in finding an online registration form or easy instructions on how to register in-person. This also makes it easier for youth to be at least somewhat aware of local and national political issues be it through the easy access to headline news apps on smartphones, or through the varied political postings by friends and family on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, we have a myriad of studies that show youth today are more engaged in community service than previous generations. While some of this may simply be to fulfill the evolving expectations of potential employers, the fact remains that youth are likely to be more aware of local issues as they are more involved in local communities and serving more often alongside their neighbors. Thus, it is difficult to believe that the residential transience of youth is a compelling cause for varying turnout rates.

The second group of theories centers around the belief that youth voters are more likely to be influenced by major events or significant shifts in policy. Gerald Pomper explains that due to an increasingly polarized political environment, coupled with the increased education levels of younger generations, youth voters are more likely to make issue-based voting a priority.³ Youth voters are thus prone to select a few issues that they care deeply about and base their votes on the candidates’ views towards those issues because of the improved ability of youth voters to maintain a constant awareness on specific policy proposals. These issues are more likely to be based on social policy, such as same-sex marriage and other LGBT rights, abortion rights, and civil rights.

Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks demonstrate that youth voters are more likely to be impacted by major events than older generations.⁴ Events such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the end of the Cold War, the peacetime economic prosperity of the 1990s, and the subsequent economic recession in 2008 have all had significant influence on youth voters, particularly those youth who came of age in the midst of these events. Vietnam and Watergate damaged public trust in government. President Ronald Reagan’s tough talk towards the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the USSR moved many moderate Democratic voters towards the Republican Party. The economic prosperity of the 1990s predisposed Millennials to the Democratic Party, as did the economic recession in 2008 on President George W. Bush’s watch. These kinds of events can shape, at least initially, the political leanings and party loyalties of youth voters.

A problem arises when considering the theory that youth voters are more likely to cast issue-based votes as research has demonstrated that not only do overriding issues rarely appear among the American electorate, but they fail to serve as an overriding influence on voters when they do occur.⁵ Additionally, most voters fail to demonstrate a consistent political ideology when expressing their views in the voting booth. As youth are even more unlikely to have developed a firm political ideology, it would certainly call into question the validity of this belief. Furthermore, through his own research, Pomper demonstrated that it was likely not generational divides that caused an increase in issue-based voting, but a general change in the political atmosphere.⁶ The increase of informational access has allowed all voters, not simply the youth, to better educate themselves on specific policy issues. While evidence does seem to show youth voters being more influenced by major events, there is little evidence to show that this affects

youth turnout. Thus, issue-based voting cannot be a compelling reason to explain youth voter turnout, particularly as there is little evidence to suggest that a significant number of youth voters are even casting such votes.

The third group of theories centers on a perception among youth that the current system of American governance is broken. Youth consider it a wasted effort to participate in a system that is incapable of producing the results desired by the voting public. One of the most startling findings suggests that youth do not believe that popular initiative can cause political change.⁷ Mark Strama believes “volunteering may be a substitute for voting and other forms of political participation for many who feel they cannot make a difference through the political system.”⁸ This suggests that voting is no longer considered to be a worthy exercise of political action by many youth, who opt to express themselves politically through alternative methods, such as volunteering for a non-profit organization, or tutoring at local elementary schools.

Additionally, youth believe that even if they were to vote, they would not be able to find a single honest candidate whom they could support. Youth believe that candidates may say one thing during a campaign, but when it comes time to vote on an issue, the candidate will buckle and surrender to whatever the politically safe position is in order to ensure their own job security.⁹ If a candidate cannot be trusted to follow through on a previously stated policy position or ideological point of view, how can voters make a decision that is consistent with their own beliefs? This political strategy employed by government officials has disillusioned youth, causing them to forego participation in the system at all.

These theories come closer to explaining what causes youth voters to turnout, but they have some critical issues that must be addressed. First, while it is generally believed that youth are more apathetic towards politics than older generations, there is no substantive research to prove this. The fact that youth are volunteering at record rates and are willing to participate in local programs that benefit their community demonstrates that youth are not opposed to participating in the political system in general. Unless it can be shown that youth political apathy is restricted solely to the act of voting, it cannot be used as a compelling reason to explain trends in youth voter turnout. Also, youth voters are not alone in believing the political system is broken or that politicians cannot be trusted. Older generations of voters express these same beliefs when asked, yet they still vote more often than the youth. Without significant evidence that shows these to be overriding beliefs for youth, in that their mistrust of government supplants all other motivations for voting, it is not likely this can definitively explain variations in youth voter turnout.

Miller and Shanks expound on a relatively new theory that claims social connectivity is the best explanation and predictor of voter turnout in general. They operationalized social connectivity through five indicators: home ownership, number of years in the home, number of years in the community, marital status, and church attendance.¹⁰ Their research showed that the more connected one was to his/her community, the more likely s/he was to vote. This was similar to party identification as an indicator of voter turnout in that the strength of one’s party identification was a likely determinant to a person’s likelihood to vote.¹¹ While this research seemed to provide a new way of considering the causes of voter turnout, there were some significant questions about its validity.

First, the measures used to determine a person’s social connectivity may not be ideal. Miller and Shanks themselves acknowledge that these five were the only relevant indicators in the NES data collected during the 1980s.¹² The lack of information concerning other possible indicators, such as volunteerism, patronage of local businesses, and location of employment to name a few results in the idea of social connectivity being severely restricted. This is particularly important when considering youth voters. Youth are less likely than other voters to own a house or to remain for an extended period of time in a community. Basing two of the five social connectivity indicators on home ownership is going to severely depress the ability to accurately predict youth voter turnout because of their transient nature. It is possible for youth voters to still be significantly socially connected, perhaps even more so than their older neighbors, despite not owning a home or living for an extended period in a community. Thus, the number of indicators must be expanded and adapted.

Second, the lack of data severely hinders the opportunity for this research to be conducted. As mentioned, there are few relevant indicators to measure social connectivity, in large part because researchers are not being encouraged to ask relevant questions. In order for social connectivity to be verified as a strong indicator of a person’s likelihood to vote, more research must be conducted and that research must be broader than what has previously been completed. This must include not only additional relevant indicators, but also the ability to consider a generational divide as a cause of variation within social connectivity. Different generations have different concepts of what defines being involved and connected to the community. Research needs to be able to account for these variable definitions in order to portray an accurate picture of voter turnout across age groups.

3. Methodology

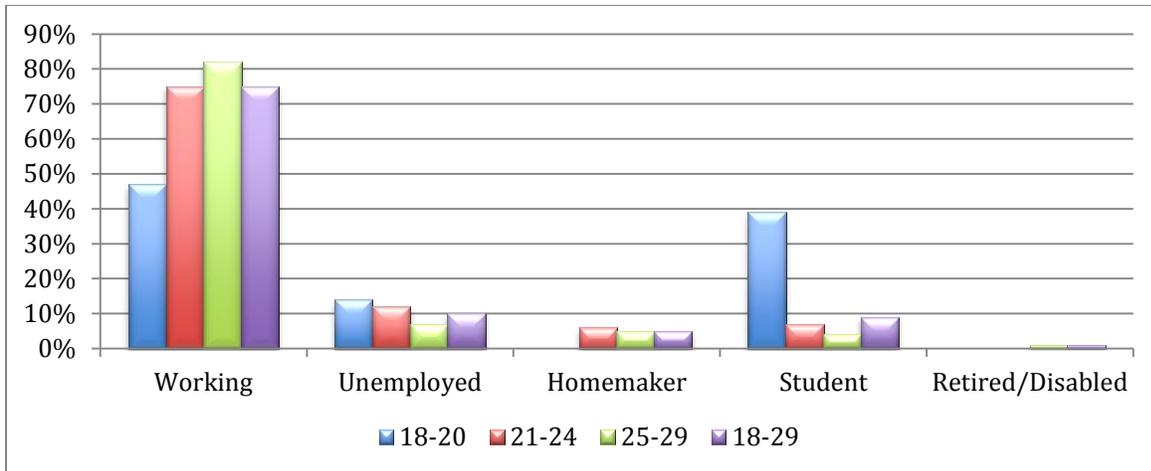
I looked at ANES data archives from the 1992 and 2008 presidential elections to determine if social connectivity proved to correlate with high youth voter turnout. Only the 1992 and 2008 elections have had voter turnout above 50% since the 26th amendment lowered the voting age to eighteen years old, (excluding the 1974 election which immediately followed the amendment's adoption). By selecting these two years, I had two similar elections to compare in order to determine if social connectivity has declined along with the voter turnout from Generation X to the Millennial generation. I chose to follow the lead of Miller and Shanks in selecting two of my three indicators for social connectivity: marital status and church attendance. I eliminated home ownership, as I do not feel it to be a dynamic indicator of social connectivity among this age group due to the general transient nature of 18-29 year olds. In its place, I chose to look at employment status, believing that if youth are working, or studying as full-time students, they are more likely to be involved in the community and informed of community issues.

I wanted to consider the rate of community volunteerism as well, but the ANES survey did not ask a relevant question to measure that variable. In future research, this indicator should be investigated, particularly with regard to youth voters, as I believe it could provide significant evidence of one's social connectivity given that youth are believed to express their civic participation more often through volunteering within their communities than older citizens. Additionally, the lack of many relevant indicators could hamper my research in the same way that it hampered Miller and Shanks. In the future, research on social connectivity must expand to include more indicators, which thus necessitates a change in the questions asked in surveys like the ANES. All the data analyzed in this paper must be looked at with a grain of salt, as the sample sizes were too small to be considered statistically significant (usually between 180 to 240 respondents), again a sign that this field of research is largely being ignored by election survey administrators. I compared the responses to the three questions in both the 1992 and 2008 presidential elections in which the youth vote was entirely made up of members of Generation X and Millennials respectively. Additionally, I looked at the data in smaller, more homogeneous age groups (18-20, 21-24, and 25-29) in order to see if there was significant variation within the aggregate group.

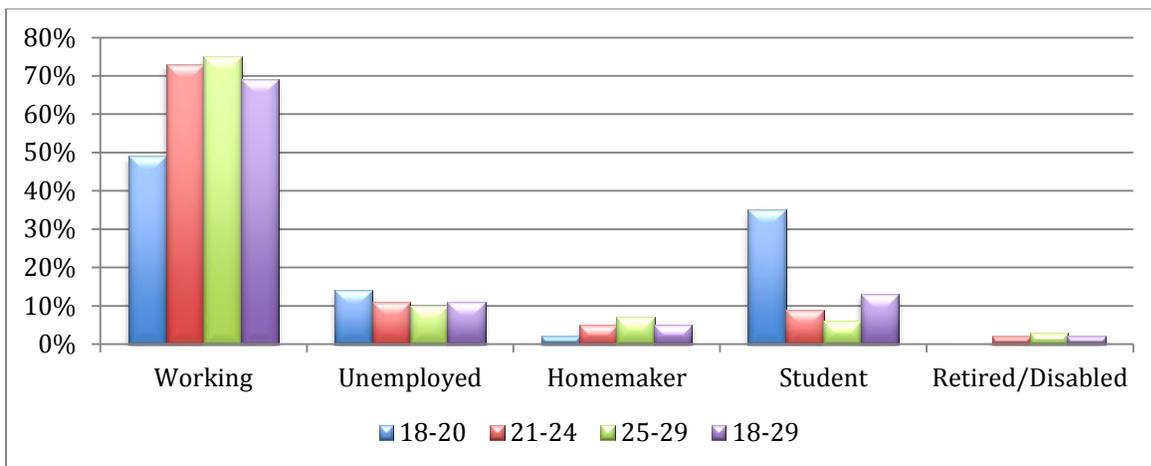
2.1 Data Analysis

The 1992 presidential election represented a high mark for youth voter turnout not seen since the passage of the 26th amendment in 1971.¹³ This was largely attributed to the charismatic personality of Bill Clinton as well as the unusual competitive nature of the election, only strengthened by Ross Perot's presence as the first electorally significant third-party candidate since Teddy Roosevelt ran as the Bull Moose Party candidate in 1912. As reported by The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), youth voter turnout was at 51% for the 2008 election, marking only the third time since the lowering of the voting age that youth voter turnout topped above 50%.¹⁴ 2008 represented a turning point for youth voter turnout as pundits began to speculate if this was the new normal for youth voters in the Millennial generation. The general nature of presidential elections in the 2000s has been competitive, which would indicate that the traditional paradigm is correct in explaining the increase in voter turnout. However, the levels for the 2000 and 2012 elections did not come close to approaching the levels of 1992 and 2008. Since the former two elections were undeniably competitive, the traditional paradigm cannot be the explanatory factor for varying rates in youth turnout.

The first social connectivity indicator to consider is employment status. The 1992 presidential race highlighted plans to put a faltering economy back on track. The 2008 presidential race was largely dominated by contrasting views of how to strengthen a severely weakened economy. Voters were grappling with a rise in unemployment. If this impacted youth as it impacted the general population, we would expect to see fewer youth voters in times of higher unemployment. Graphs 1 and 2 give the responses from youth voters concerning their employment status at the time of the election.



Graph 1 Youth Voter Employment Status (1992)



Graph 2 Youth Voter Employment Status (2008)

In both years, approximately 10% of the youth voters reported being unemployed. However, an additional 6% of youth voters in 1992 were working as opposed to youth voters in 2008. This explains the higher percent of youth voters reporting as students in 2008. What is curious about the student statistic is the difference in the 18-20 year old group. In 2008, when more youth voters are reporting to be students, the percentage of traditional college age youth voters who are attending school is lower than in 1992. The increase of youth voters responding as students then does not come from an increase of college age youth choosing to vote, but from older youth who are now in college. This could be indicative of the effects of rising tuition costs forcing youth to stay in school longer than previous generations in order to complete a traditional four-year degree. This would also explain the higher percentage of 18-20 year olds who responded as currently working in 2008 than their generational counterparts in 1992. Also of note is the significant difference in the percentage of 25-29 year old youth voters who responded as currently working. 2008 saw a 7% decrease in this statistic, accompanied by a 3% increase in those reporting as unemployed. This suggests that 25-29 year old youth voters in 2008 were more severely impacted by the recession than the similarly aged voters in 1992 were affected by their own economic troubles.

Curiously, as the number of voters reporting as students increases, the overall youth voter turnout has decreased. Traditionally, one of the major “get-out-the-vote” (GOTV) efforts of parties and candidates during an election year is to organize registration drives at college campuses. As we know that increased registration is a good indicator of increased voter turnout,¹⁵ it seems odd that an increased number of students on campuses across the U.S. would not result in an increased number of voter registrations, and thus an increased voter turnout on election day. One

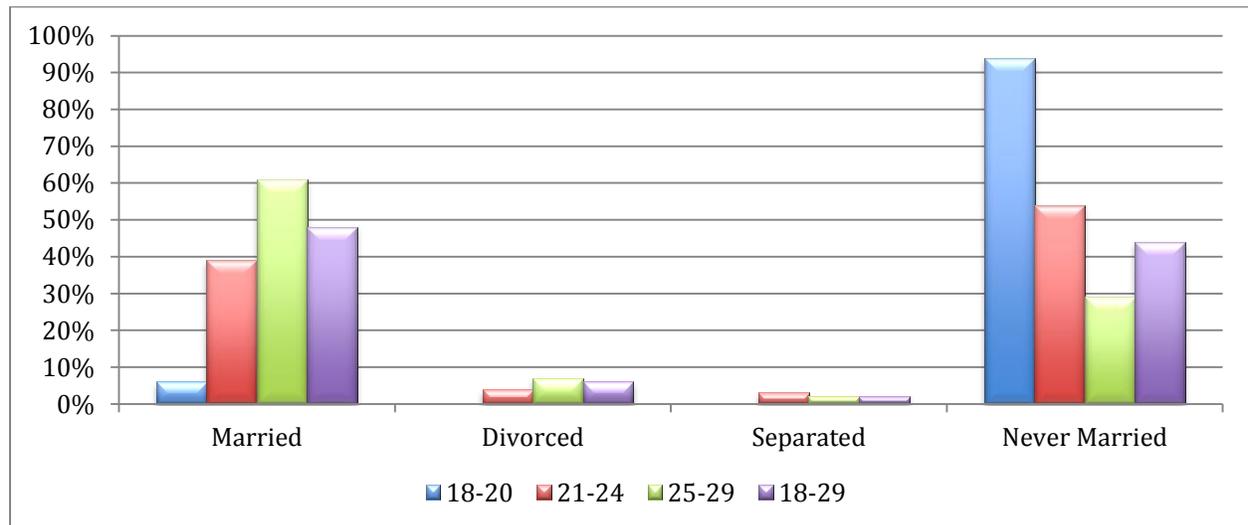
possibility is that the media coverage in 2008 of various states' efforts to mandate voter ID laws may have impacted the decision of potential youth voters to not register or participate in the voting process at all. Further research should be conducted to identify the cause of this seemingly incongruent finding and whether it is simply an anomaly or the beginning of a trend among students to decide to vote less often. At any rate, based on this research, campaigns should re-evaluate their GOTV efforts. Working youth, not students, are the largest block of youth voters and are more likely than students to vote. Campaigns should target their efforts on ensuring that working youth voters who support their respective candidates are getting to the polls on Election Day.

Based on these results, we can see that a higher percentage of youth voters self-reporting as currently working does correlate with a higher youth voter turnout. Employment status is a good measure of social connectivity as it demonstrates that when a youth citizen is in the work force, s/he is more likely to turnout to vote on Election Day.

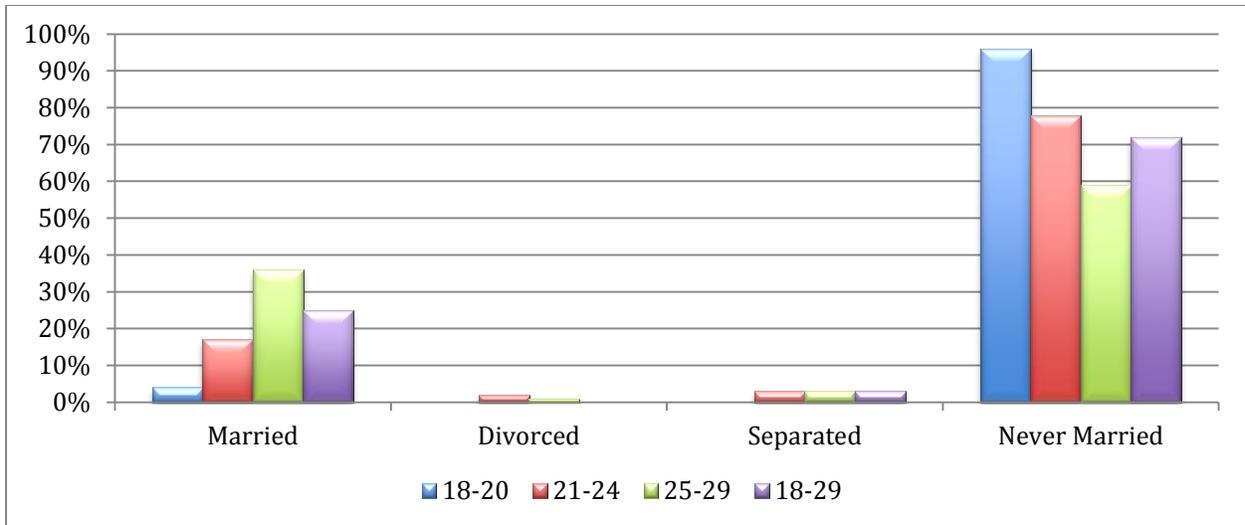
The second indicator I looked at was marital status. This is one of the indicators favored by Miller and Shanks when they conducted their preliminary research into social connectivity. At the time of their research they found that "citizens who are better tied into social structures of family ... consistently turn out to vote with greater frequency."¹⁶ However, youth voters are less likely than older citizens to be have a traditional family structure due to the transient nature they adopt to attend school and seek after gainful employment among other things. Thus, I wanted to determine if marital status among youth has the same effect on voter turnout as it does for the general population. Graphs 3 and 4 show the responses of youth voters when asked for their marital status in 1992 and 2008.

We can immediately see a significant difference between the marital statuses of the two generations. In 1992, almost half of youth voters responded as married or partnered. In 2008, only one-quarter of youth voters could say the same. The difference is even greater when looking at those responding as having never married. 2008 saw the share of youth voters giving that response increase by 28%. The share of youth voters reporting as divorced saw a sharp decline from 6% in 1992 to less than 1% in 2008, however this likely has more to do with the fact that there were fewer youth in 2008 who had ever married, than a sign that divorce among youth voters is declining.

These results cause a problem for the social connectivity theory. If marital status is a reliable indicator for a person's social connectivity, then we would expect it to correlate with voter turnout. However, despite a significant decline in marital status from 1992 to 2008, a similar decline in voter turnout was not found. As research has found the median age of marriage in the U.S. to be increasing, this could suggest that marriage is not a requirement for youth voters to be socially connected.¹⁷ As a result, it is possible that marital status is not a good indicator of youth social connectivity much for the same reason that home ownership does not work when applied to youth voters. Like home ownership, marriage is something that a supermajority of youth voters simply does not participate in, and thus cannot be an accurate barometer for the voting behavior of the aggregate age group.



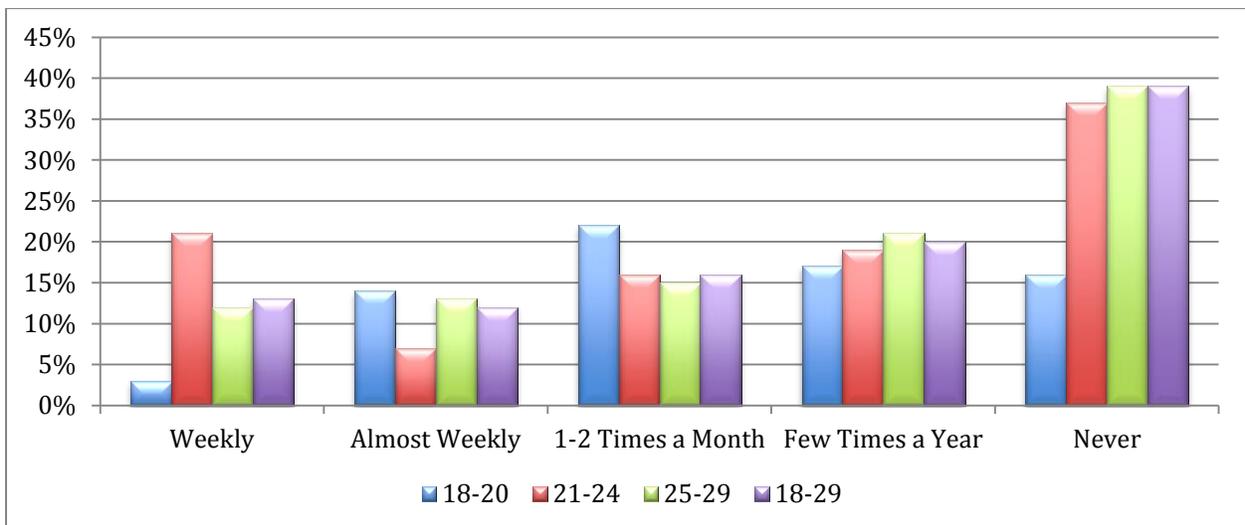
Graph 3 Youth Voter Marital Status (1992)



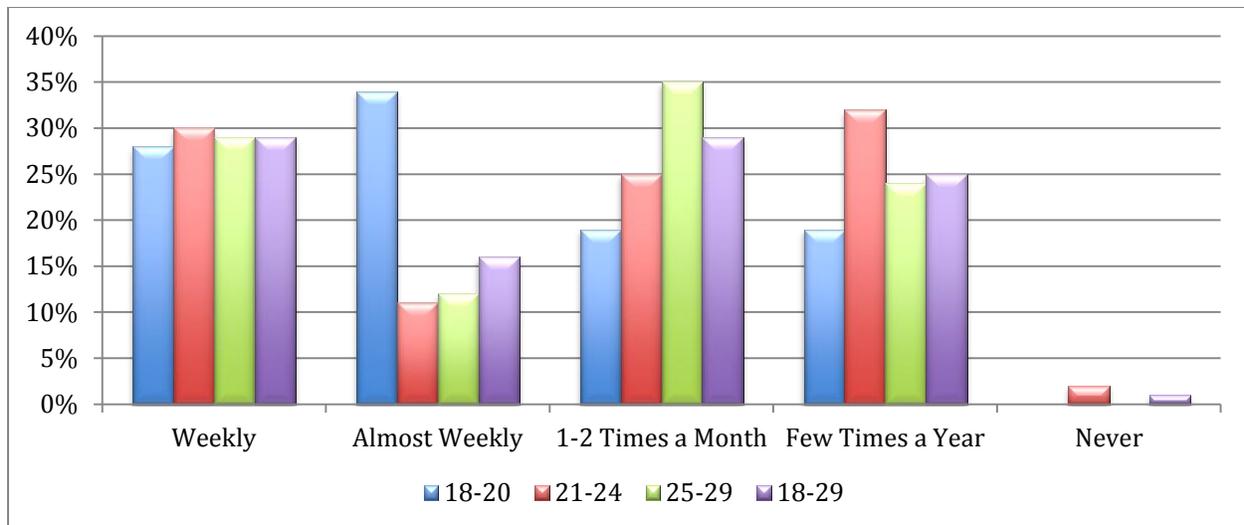
Graph 4 Youth Voter Marital Status (2008)

The last indicator I used to measure social connectivity among youth voters is attendance at religious services. This was again one of the indicators used by Miller and Shanks in their study of the general population and thus has a precedence of being a reliable measure of social connectivity. Research has consistently shown that the Millennial generation is less likely to attend religious services than previous generations.¹⁸ As a result, there is some question as to whether attendance of religious services can serve as a valid measure of social connectivity among youth voters. Graphs 5 and 6 show the responses.

Perhaps the most interesting result from this data is that the percentage of youth voters who attend religious services either weekly or almost weekly has unexpectedly increased from 1992 to 2008. The respondents in these two groups made up only one-quarter of the youth voter pool in 1992. In 2008, this percentage almost doubled to 45% of the youth voter population. While research has indicated that Millennials are no longer attending religious services as often as their counterparts in previous generations, the Millennial voters are more religiously observant than the youth voters of Generation X.



Graph 5 Youth Voter Religious Services Attendance (1992)



Graph 6 Youth Voter Religious Services Attendance (2008)

Even more surprising is the percentage of youth voters who responded as never attending religious services. In 1992, nearly 40% of the youth vote reported they never attended religious services. In 2008, only 1% of the youth vote gave the same response. Again, this data shows that Millennial voters appear to be very different from the general Millennial population with regards to religious observance, perhaps suggesting that the Pew research is inaccurate. Pew found that only 18% of Millennials and 21% of Generation X attended religious services weekly or almost weekly. This data holds closely for Generation X, as we find only 25% of youth voters in 1992 reporting to attend religious services that often. At a 54% turnout rate, the youth vote in 1992 seems to be a relatively good sample of the overall youth population with regards to religious observance. However, the same cannot be said for the Millennial generation in the 2008 election. With 45% of Millennial voters saying they weekly or almost weekly attend religious services, and a 51% voter turnout, the sample is heavily skewed towards those who are religiously observant. We can conclude from this data that a significant percentage of Millennials who did not vote in 2008 are also less likely to be attending religious services on a weekly basis. These youth are supposed to make up over 80% of the Millennial population, but the voting turnout and subsequent survey responses suggest that this percentage may be smaller.

Another interesting point is the difference in the youngest age group between the two elections. Over 50% of 18-20 year old Millennials reported attending religious services weekly or almost weekly. Less than 20% of 18-20 year old members of Generation X responded the same. One would expect this group to be the least likely to regularly attend religious services, in part due to their transient nature, but also due to their desire to break away from the traditional bonds their parents set in order to more fully develop a unique persona. Religious service attendance is typically something we expect to see increase with age. This does not appear to be the case for Millennials. One reason could be that Millennials are increasingly living with their parents after graduating high school due to a weakened economy. Thus, this diminishes the opportunity for Millennials to break away from their parents' expectations, and increases the likelihood that they are continuing to follow family traditions.

Based on this data, religious observance does not correlate with youth voter turnout. Lower attendance accompanied a higher youth voter turnout in 1992, but significantly increased attendance accompanied a slight decrease in youth voter turnout in 2008. The large disparity between the religious observance responses in the two election cycles does correlate with the rather modest disparity in youth voter turnout. Thus, the ability of religious service attendance to be an accurate measure of youth social connectivity as it relates to predicting youth voter turnout is flawed.

3. Conclusion

Based on the indicators used, social connectivity has at best an ambiguous relationship to youth voter turnout. Employment status is our best indicator of the three as it does have a correlation to youth voter turnout. If youth are

working, they are more likely to vote. I also found that students do not behave the same as employed youth. An increase in the student population, as occurred for the 2008 election, does not accompany a similar increase in youth voter turnout.

Marital status is a troublesome indicator. A much smaller percentage of Millennial voters reported being married in 2008 than their Generation X counterparts in 1992. This does not reflect what was only a slight difference in youth voter turnout between the two elections. Furthermore, Millennials are getting married at a later age than Generation X youth; so much later that many Millennials will no longer be considered youth voters when they do tie the knot. While the instance of married youth voters has declined, the percentage of youth voters co-habiting is on the rise. This could be the new standard by which to measure marital status in regards to social connectivity: it is not marriage, but the existence of a committed, long-term relationship that should be measured. Further research should be conducted to see if these co-habiting relationships behave the same way as married couples with regard to youth voter turnout.

Finally, religious service attendance data had a negative correlation to youth voter turnout. The finding that Millennial youth voters are more religiously observant than those from Generation X is contrary to the mountain of research done to demonstrate that Millennials are the least religiously observant generation in U.S. history. This may be because the data does not tell the whole story. Many Millennial youth may attend religious services not because they want to or because they agree with a particular religion, but because they want to show respect for their parents and the traditions of their families. Due to the weak economy, many Millennials are remaining at home with their parents for a longer duration than the generations before them. As a result, this may strengthen the familial ties, causing youth voters to continue attending something they do not personally believe in out of deference to their parents. More research should be done to explore how the Millennial's changing living habits are affecting their political behavior.

Taken together, I cannot say with confidence that social connectivity explains youth voter turnout. However, I cannot state the negative finding either. It is possible that the chosen indicators are not effective measures of social connectivity. I need to consider other indicators, and certainly more of them, in order to better understand the relationship, if one exists, between social connectivity and youth voter turnout. Additionally, there is some concern that the indicator data merely correlates with the voter turnout data rather than being a source of causation. It is difficult to ascertain which relationship, either correlation or causation, exists between the data due to the extremely low sample size. Further research in this field must be conducted to demonstrate causation, and this research must be done with more indicators that include a significant sample size. Perhaps the most troubling discovery I did make during the course of my research was the lack of data and information about youth voter behavior. All of the data collected for this paper from the ANES database cannot be considered statistically significant due to the extremely small sample sizes. If we are going to be able to learn about the causes of youth voter turnout, and youth political behavior in general, we must make a more concerted effort to include youth citizens in our data pool. Technological advancement makes this more difficult, but that cannot be a satisfactory reason for ignoring a large population of the American electorate. The Millennial generation is the largest generation in U.S. history. We cannot neglect the observation of this generation as it enters the political sphere of influence and expect to accurately make conclusions and predictions on the future of American politics. Hopefully, this paper can serve as the clarion call to improving and expanding the field of research into youth political behavior.

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