Older Voters and the 2008 Election

Robert H. Binstock, PhD
**Brief Report**

**Older Voters and the 2008 Election**

Robert H. Binstock, PhD

**Purpose:** In the 2008 presidential election, a majority of older persons voted for John McCain, the loser. The purposes of this report are to help illuminate why older voters were the only age-group that gave a majority to McCain and to delineate some ongoing issues in the analysis of older persons' voting behavior. **Methods:** Analysis was undertaken by mining raw data from the 2008 Edison–Mitofsky national Election Day exit poll, as well as compilations from that poll that were published by various media that finance it. **Results:** Republican leanings of the Eisenhower birth cohort that is presently among those aged 65 years and older were a factor, whereas the immediately succeeding younger cohorts did not manifest the same partisan predilection. Positive self-identification with the 72-year-old McCain by voters aged 65–74 years seems to have been another factor, although there was no indication of such age identification among those aged 60–64 years and 75 years and older. Race may have been a factor, although all groups of White voters aged 30 years and older gave McCain a substantial majority, whereas the youngest cohort of Whites, aged 18–29 years, favored Obama. **Implications:** In the study of age-group voting behavior, ongoing attention is needed to cohort and period effects, as well as candidates' contrasting individual characteristics—in addition to possible effects of campaign issues.

**Key Words:** Age-group voting, Elections, Politics of aging, Voting behavior

In July 2008, the prominent political consultant Mark Penn (2008) proclaimed, “America as a nation has never been older and the power of the senior vote has never been greater.” But he was wrong. In the 2008 presidential election, a majority of older persons voted for the loser, John McCain. It was only the second time in the last 10 presidential elections—spanning 37 years—that older voters failed to vote for the winner and did not distribute their votes among the candidates in roughly the same proportions as the electorate as a whole (New York Times, 2008).

Among all voters, Barack Obama beat McCain by a margin of 53%–46% (New York Times, 2008). Yet, persons aged 60 years and older gave 51% of their votes to McCain and 47% to Obama. Among voters aged 65 years and older, McCain was favored even more; he received 53% of their votes compared with Obama’s 45% (MSNBC, 2008). Older voters were the only age-group to give a majority to McCain. Voters aged 45–59 years gave the Republican 49%, voters aged 30–44 years gave him 46%, and voters aged 18–29 years gave him just 32% (New York Times).

This brief report presents data that help illuminate why older voters voted more heavily for McCain. These data are from the 2008 national Election Day exit poll conducted by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International (herein after referred to as the E/M poll), which was financed by television networks, and major newspapers and magazines. The data were obtained by the author directly from E/M and from compilations from the E/M poll, which were undertaken and published by various media. The 2008 E/M poll did not ask questions about old-age policy issues, which were not especially
prominent in the election campaign. And even when such issues have been prominent in presidential campaigns over the past four decades, there has been no credible evidence that older persons have responded to them as an issue voting bloc (see Campbell, 2005; Street, 1999). But in 2008, factors other than old-age policy issues—in particular, older voters’ partisan leanings, the candidates’ contrasting ages, and the candidates’ contrasting racial identities—shed some light on why McCain received distinctive majorities from various cohorts of older voters.

Republican Partisanship?

One possible explanation is that the older voters of 2008 were more attached to the Republican Party than were the preceding birth cohorts of the aged (for a broader discussion of age, cohort, and period effects in presidential elections, see Frenk, 2008). There were signs of this in 2004 when older groups gave Republican George W. Bush a slightly larger percentage of the vote than the 51% that he received overall. In that election, voters aged 60 years and older gave Bush 54% and voters aged 65 years and older gave him 52% (see Table 1). This preference for the Republican candidate among older persons was a notable change from the 2000 election when the 60 years and older group voted 51% for Democrat John Kerry and 47% for George Bush (New York Times, 2008).

The partisan leaning of the birth cohort that is now aged in its late 60s is definitely a factor in explaining the preference of a majority of current older voters for Republican presidential candidates. Beginning in their early teens, this cohort was socialized to politics during the 8 years of Dwight Eisenhower’s presidency. Eisenhower was the first Republican president in 20 years, following the five consecutive terms served by Democrats Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. The comparatively strong affinity for Republican candidates for president within this Eisenhower cohort of older voters was displayed in both the 2004 and the 2008 elections.

In 2004, these voters were largely in the range of 60–64 years old. Table 1 shows that this age-group voted substantially more for Bush (57%) than did persons aged 65 years and older (52%), persons aged 45–59 years (51%), and all other age-groups. In 2008, when much of this same cohort had moved into the 65–74 age range, its ongoing Republican leanings were also clearly evident (thanks to the availability of data on older voters broken down by age-groups 60–64 years, 65–74 years, and 75 years and older). As Table 2 indicates, the Eisenhower cohort contributed to the strong 54% support given to McCain by 65- to 74-year-olds. In comparison, the oldest cohort, aged 75 years and over, gave McCain only 51%. And in notable contrast, the cohort aged 60–64 years in 2008 (a Kennedy cohort) voted in favor of the Democrat (50% to 48%) rather than the Republican.

Age-Group Identification?

To what extent did McCain’s status as an older person play a role in the comparatively stronger support he received from older voters? In August of 2008, McCain turned 72 years and Obama reached age 48 years. As indicated in Table 2, the 54% given to McCain by voters aged 65–74 years was the largest he received from any age-group. Were a significant number of older persons swayed to support him because of their self-identification with his age?

The Candidates’ Ages

The exit poll asked voters whether “the age of the candidates” was a factor in deciding their vote. An overwhelming majority of all voters (83%) responded that it was of no or little importance, despite much pre-election speculation to the contrary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-groups</th>
<th>Bush</th>
<th>Kerry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All ages</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–59</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–44</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-groups</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>Obama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All ages</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–64</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–59</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sources—Edison/Mitofsky (2004) and J. Lenski (personal communication, September 12, 2005).
Not an important factor: 60%

A minor factor: 23%

One of several important factors: 13%

The single most important factor: 2%

Among age categories, the totaled responses for “not an important factor” and “a minor factor” ranged from 81% to 88%. Particularly striking is the similarity between the totals for the youngest age-group and the oldest age-groups. The percentage total for 18- to 24-year-olds was 83%, and for the oldest groups they were 84% (60–64 years old), 83% (65–74 years old), and 83% (75 years and older).

Judgment

Although the exit poll did not indicate that the ages of the two candidates, per se, were much of a factor, characteristics often popularly associated with older ages did seem to play a role in the differences among age-groups in this election. In the eyes of voters, for instance, a candidate’s judgment or lack of judgment might be perceived as a characteristic associated with age. The E/M poll asked, “Which candidate do you think has the right judgment to make a good president?” The responses were as follows:

- Only Barack Obama: 43%
- Only John McCain: 36%
- Both of them: 13%
- Neither of them: 6%

The age distribution of responses is remarkable with respect to the differences among voters in the older age categories in crediting McCain with the right judgment. Table 3 shows that persons in the 65–74 years category—the specific category that includes McCain’s age—were 10% points higher than those aged 60–64 years and 13% points higher than those aged 75 years and older in their endorsement of McCain’s judgment. This far greater approval of McCain’s judgment by voters in his specific age category gives some credence to the notion that McCain’s age was a positive factor in attracting the votes of persons aged 65–74 years, in particular.

Experience

Some voters also might have perceived experience or lack of it as a characteristic associated with age. The E/M poll asked, “Which candidate do you think has the experience to serve effectively as president?” The responses were as follows:

- Only John McCain: 40%
- Only Barack Obama: 32%
- Both of them: 19%
- Neither of them: 9%

It is not particularly remarkable that McCain registered more favorably than Obama on this criterion. Although neither candidate had any public service experience as an executive, McCain was serving his fourth term as a U.S. senator, whereas Obama was in only his first term. Moreover, McCain’s role in effectively sponsoring legislation—such as the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform (Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, 2002)—had been reasonably well publicized over many years.

But among older voters, in particular, the distribution of responses to the experience question also lends weight to the interpretation that some of them may have self-identified positively with McCain’s age. As can be seen in Table 4, voters in the age bracket 65–74 years were stronger in endorsing McCain’s experience (49%) than were voters just younger (aged 60–64 years) and older (aged 75 years and older). These data regarding experience, viewed in isolation, are not strong indicators that positive identification with McCain’s particular age was a factor. But, taken together with the data on judgment, the argument for specific age-group identification regarding McCain becomes more robust.

However, it should be noted in both Tables 3 and 4 that although voters aged 60–64 years were substantially less enthusiastic about McCain’s
judgment and experience than the voters in McCain’s age-group, the 40- to 49-year-olds were only slightly less enthusiastic—only from 2 to 3 percentage points lower than voters in the age-group of 65–74 years. Because there is not an apparent explanation for the rough proximity of 65- to 74-year-olds and 40- to 49-year-olds in their evaluations of the candidates’ judgment and experience, this observation attenuates somewhat the interpretation regarding the older group’s positive age identification with McCain.

Was Race a Factor Among Older Voters?

Going into the election, pundits, journalists, and political consultants generally expected that the contrasting racial identities of the two candidates might influence voters. And, as it turned out, 55% of Whites voted for McCain, whereas 95% of Blacks and 67% of Hispanics voted for Obama (New York Times, 2008).

Before the election, it was reasonable to hypothesize that older voters would be more likely than younger voters to be influenced negatively by Obama’s racial identity because of the interplay of birth cohort and period effects. In the era in which older cohorts grew up, overt racial disdain and discrimination were structurally and culturally stronger than in succeeding eras, especially in the Southern states.

Yet, in the 2008 E/M exit poll, older voters stated overwhelmingly that race was not a factor in their choice between candidates. Like all voters, they were asked, “In deciding your vote for president today, was the race of the candidates: the single most important factor; one of several important factors; a minor factor; not a factor at all.” They responded overwhelmingly that race was not a factor at all. Overall, 80% of voters polled chose this option regarding the unimportance of race, and older voters registered even slightly higher percentages—82% among those aged 60–64 years, 81% among those aged 65–74 years, and 84% of those aged 75 years and older.

Although the vast majority of voters stated that race was not a factor, Table 5 shows that voters of different races made distinctly different selections of their preferred presidential candidates in 2008. McCain received 55% of White votes, compared with only 31% from Latinos and just 4% from Blacks. Among voters aged 65 years and older, nationwide, Whites cast 58% of their ballots for McCain, slightly higher than the overall average for all Whites. However, McCain received similar percentages from White voters aged 30–44 (57%) and 45–64 years (56%). Only the youngest age-group of Whites (aged 18–29 years) voted for Obama, giving him 54% of their ballots. Consequently, if cohort and period effects had any impact in the form of elevating race as a factor in this election, it was at work among all groups of voters aged 30 years and older, not just the oldest voters.

It cannot be concluded on the basis of these nationwide data on White voters that race was a factor in older persons nationwide being the only age-group that voted for McCain. But regional figures suggest the possibility of a racial period effect among older White voters in the South. Voters aged 60 years and older (including all races) in that region cast 62% of their ballots for McCain, compared with 45% in the East, 46% in the Midwest, and 47% in the West among voters of all races (M. Connelly, personal communication via e-mail regarding regional percentages of votes for President, based on Edison/Mitofsky 2008 data; retrieved November 15, 2008, from readerservice@nytimes.com).
cohorts merit further attention as they move ahead through the life course. The Eisenhower cohort may remain steadfastly Republican. But its impact on future aggregate tallies for the categories of voters aged 60 years and older and 65 years and older may be vitiated by the imminent entrance of new cohorts into the old-age categories. These are voters who were socialized to politics as youngsters during the Democratic presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson in the mid-1960s, and they are members of the leading edge of the large boomer cohort. And, as shown in Table 2, the vanguard of the boomers, the Kennedy cohort, aged 60–64 years in the 2008 election, voted for Obama, the Democrat.

At the younger end of the voting spectrum, it will be interesting to see if the two thirds of voters aged 18–29 years who voted for Obama will continue to favor Democratic candidates so strongly in the future. Particular features of the 2008 presidential contest—such as the contrasts in age, race, basic messages, and styles of Obama and McCain—may have had much to do with the exceptionally strong Democratic vote by this young group. Such a configuration of contrasting candidate characteristics may not be approximated in the future, when these voters are older.

Finally, what about the political leanings of boomers as they increasingly begin to join old-age categories? A number of authors (e.g., Thurow, 1996) have argued that boomers will be politically cohesive and engage in class warfare between the young and the old. So far, boomers have not been cohesive. For instance, Table 2 shows that in 2008 voters aged 45–59 years split their votes evenly, and those aged 60–64 years gave Obama just a two-point edge. Of course, the future state of the old-age entitlement programs—Social Security and Medicare—as well as the content of policy agendas concerning them (which could be drastic) might well have a politically cohesive effect on boomers when they are old.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the assistance of Joseph Lenski and Liz Doyle of Edison Media Research and Marjorie Connelly of The New York Times for their assistance in making 2008 national exit poll data available for analysis.