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Young Voter Turnout in the Midterm Elections

Introduction

The 2022 Midterm Elections proved a vital testing ground for the coming 2024 Presidential Election while being impactful in its own right. Issues like inflation, abortion, voting rights, and concerns for American democracy brought high turnout in the midterm election. With President Biden facing a low-approval rating and ongoing inflation concerns, many predicted voters would shift heavily in favor of the Republican party. That prediction failed to materialize due to young voters.

Question 1: How did Gen Z and millennials turn out in the 2022 midterm elections and to what effect?

According to exit polls from the 2022 midterm elections, around 1 in 8 voters were between the ages of 18-30, encompassing the older members of Gen-Z and the youngest members of the Millennial generation. Estimates suggest that 27 percent of people between those same ages turned out to vote, the second highest youth turnout in the past thirty years. Sixty-three percent of voters from this demographic voted in favor of Democratic candidates. This impact was not properly accounted for when pollsters predicted a “red wave” as young voters bolstered support for Democrats. A key concern for several young voters was the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Roe v Wade*. One of the top issues young voters cited as most decisive when casting their ballot was overwhelmingly abortion rights. While many polls suggested that inflation would be the primary issue for voters, abortion narrowly overtook it, taking priority for approximately 30% of all voters.

It is not without good reason that pollsters underestimated youth voters. Young voters are typically less motivated to vote than their elders, but the 2018 and 2020 election cycles saw a significant uptick for the 18-30 year old demographic. As young millennials and older Gen Z voters grew up in the early digital age, they received more exposure to political events through social media than their elders would have at the same age. Their impact did not go unnoticed when poll results returned, as Democrat politicians thanked their young voters for their support. Addressing the midterm results from the White House, President Biden remarked, “I especially want to thank the young people of this nation, who — I’m told... voted in historic numbers again, just as they did two years ago,” commending young voters for their crucial role in preventing the predicted red wave.

Question 2: What was the “red wave,” and how did it measure up to expectations?

A frequent pattern of midterm elections sees the party of the active president take a hit, often leading the opposition party to claim many seats in Congress. The outlook of the 2022 midterms predicted that a “red wave” would wash out Democratic congress members *en masse* under Democratic president Joe Biden, leaving seats to flip in favor of the Republican party. Despite robust predictions, the red wave did not come to fruition. Biden praised his party’s performance, saying, “While any seat lost is painful... Democrats had a strong night.” This comes in the wake of a surprising atypical historical performance during a midterm election year.

While Republicans did not have a red wave, they did secure enough wins to outnumber their Democratic counterparts in the House of Representatives. However, they failed to capture a majority in the US Senate.

Question 3: What generational political shifts can we expect based on the 2022 midterm results?

The high turnout of Gen Z and Millennial voters is a clear sign of political activism in today’s youth. The question now is how this will affect our political system going forward. In the 2022 midterm elections, the Republican Party did not attain the successes they initially expected. This was due to the tremendous turnout of young voters. Exit polls found that Gen-Z and Millennial voters overwhelmingly favored the Democratic Party: 63 percent of Gen-Z and millennial voters, aged 18 to 29, voted for Democrats. This statistic is not what stands out, however. Historically, younger generations have been shown to support the Democratic Party. Yet, the model of American political behavior reflects a “liberal when young, conservative when old” method of voting. So, we must question whether we can expect Gen Z and Millennial voters will follow suit.

These two generations are proving to be far more left-leaning than their predecessors were at the same age. This is mirrored in their initiatives to do more than show up to the polls; they have also been seen leading political movements such as March For Our Lives and the Sunrise Movement. Generation-Z and Millennials are also more ethnically and racially diverse than previous generations. Both of these factors will significantly influence voting behavior. Therefore, even if these generations do align to the typical model of political behavior in America, it is unlikely that they will become as conservative as the generations that came before them. By 2024, Millennials and Gen Z voters will outnumber voters who are Baby Boomers and older and we can expect this statistic to be reflected at the polls.

Conclusion

Today’s young voters sent a shock through the American political system last Tuesday with their efforts to be heard at the ballot boxes. The generations often stigmatized for their lack of attention to politics voted at historic rates in the 2022 midterm elections, altering voting patterns across the United States. The expectations of the Republican Party to take over an overwhelming majority of the seats in Congress were not met due to this turnout. Generation Z and Millennials now hint at a new future of political behavior in America as we approach a time when these voters outnumber older generations.