



# DEMOCRACY REMIXED: BLACK YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS

*A Series on Black Youth Political Engagement and the 2012 Election*

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## Youth, Race, and Voter Mobilization

Voter turnout in the 2008 presidential election surged among young people, especially among black youth and young adults. For the first time since 18-year-olds were awarded the right to vote, a majority of blacks (52 percent) between 18 and 24 turned out to vote. In this fact sheet, we highlight the following observations:

- Voter mobilization is an integral part of increasing voter turnout.
- Recent surges in youth voter turnout mirror recent increases in mobilization efforts directed at young people.
- Though political parties reach a large number of young people through their mobilization efforts, community and civic organizations also play a pivotal role in get-out-the-vote efforts.
- Mobilization efforts will be especially crucial for maintaining high levels of youth participation in 2012.

The 2008 election also marked the first time in which young black voters turned out at higher rates than young white voters. The historic nature of the 2008 election was surely a contributing factor. Interestingly, most of the media ignored the fact that the increase in youth voting, especially among black youth, was a trend established before the 2008 election. Certainly candidate Obama inspired greater confidence and interest from young black voters than had perhaps any presidential candidate in history. And President Obama's candidacy in 2012 is likely to again excite large numbers of black voters. In this fact sheet, however, we highlight

another important factor that has contributed to higher levels of youth voter turnout: **increased voter mobilization efforts.**

## **Voter Mobilization**

Mobilization efforts have been an increasingly important component of presidential campaigns. Political campaigns, civic organizations, and other groups now expend a great deal of effort on voter registration efforts and getting people to vote by reminding them of the location of their local polling place, arranging transportation to and from the voting site, or simply encouraging them to exercise their political right. Over the last thirty years, the percentage of people contacted to vote has increased by more than 50 percent. Table 1 shows the percentages of people that have reported having been mobilized to vote in presidential elections since 1980.

About half of all U.S. residents ages 18 and older were contacted and encouraged to vote in the two most recent presidential elections, up from about 25 percent as recently as 1992. Most contact was made through political parties or campaign organizations, though contact from other organizations and people not associated with the parties is also becoming increasingly important.

Table 1: Sources of Voter Mobilization in Presidential Elections, 1980–2008  
(All Ages)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Political party (%)</b>	<b>Non-party contact (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)*</b>
1980	24	10	30
1984	24	8	28
1988	24	8	27
1992	20	10	25
1996	27	11	32
2000	37	11	41
2004	44	18	51
2008	40	18	47

Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

\*This is not simply the sum of the first two columns, as some people reported being contacted both by party and nonparty organizations.

For most of this time period, the Republican Party has been much more active than the Democratic Party in voter mobilization activities. As table 2 shows, this is also the case for young people (ages 18–29).<sup>1</sup> Until 2004, about twice as many young potential voters were contacted by the Republican Party, compared to the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party closed the gap significantly in the 2004 election, and by 2008 contact rates were roughly equal. Worth noting, however, is that even as party mobilization rates have increased over the last thirty years, each party is contacting only a small fraction of potential voters in the younger age cohorts. Each party mobilizes only about 20 percent of young people between the ages of 18 and 29, which means that significant numbers of people in this age group are left uncontacted by either major political party.

<sup>1</sup> For data purposes, in this fact sheet we refer to “young people” as those aged 18–29. We note that that this age category differs from that commonly used by the U.S. Census to refer to young voters (age 18–24).

Table 2: Mobilization by Political Party in Presidential Elections, 1980–2008  
(Ages 18–29)

Year	Republican Party (%)	Democratic Party (%)
1980	14	6
1984	13	7
1988	11	6
1992	11	7
1996	12	6
2000	13	5
2004	22	16
2008	21	19

Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

## Youth Voter Mobilization

Party mobilization activities, however, have varied significantly by racial group. Table 3 below shows the percentages of youth ages 18–29 who reported being contacted to vote in the three most recent presidential elections. For the most part, white youth reported being contacted much more frequently than black and Latino youth, especially for contact by political parties. However, the gaps between racial groups closed significantly between 2000 and 2008. Contact rates among white youth remained relatively stable over this period; among black youth, the rate of contact by political parties doubled between 2004 and 2008; and more than twice as many Latino youth reported being contacted by a party in the 2008 election, compared with 2000.

Nonparty sources of mobilization also have increased in prominence. Nearly 16 percent of black youth reported being mobilized by a nonparty source in 2008, up from 3 percent in 2000; the rate more than doubled for Latino youth as well (up from 6.5 percent to nearly 14 percent). Contacts made by groups such as these have increased, yet the groups still reach out to only a small number of persons in this age group. This type of contact often depends on whether a group can secure funding to pursue such efforts.

Table 3: Youth Mobilization in Presidential Elections by Race, 2000–2008

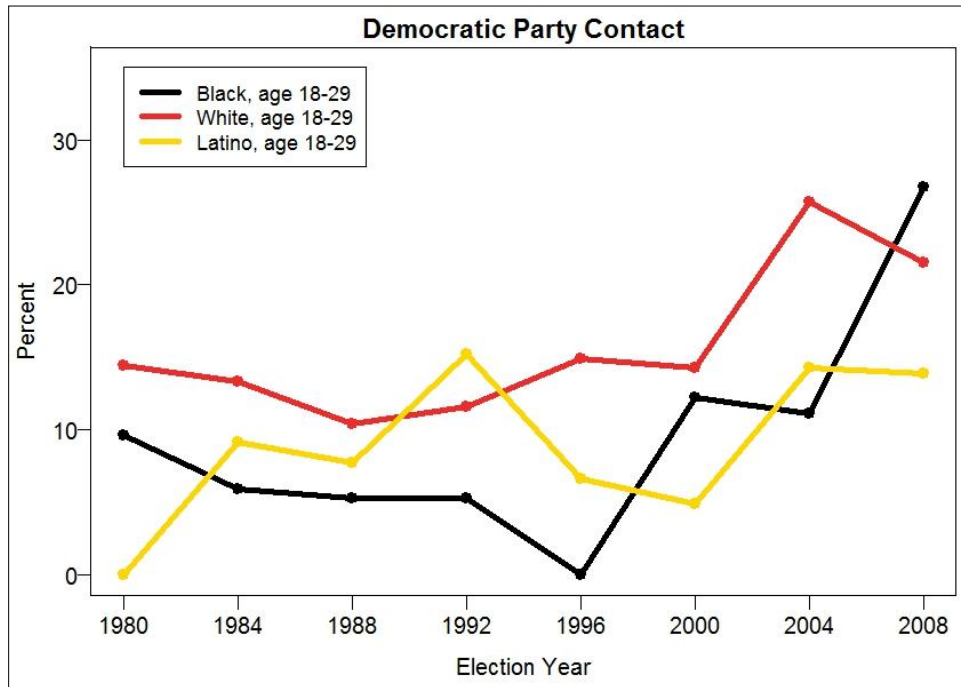
Year	Party contact			Nonparty contact		
	Black (%)	White (%)	Latino (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Latino (%)
2000	17.6	25.3	9.7	3.0	4.8	6.5
2004	15.6	30.3	20.5	15.2	12.2	7.7
2008	31.5	24.1	17.2	15.7	7.4	13.8

Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

Table 3 shows that mobilization levels in the three most recent elections are the highest levels found during the last thirty years. But though many people associate young voters with the Democratic Party, figures 1 and 2 show that *both* parties have significantly increased their mobilization efforts among younger voters. In recent years, both parties have contacted young voters at similar rates across racial groups. The 2008 election saw not only historic levels of youth turnout, but it also featured historic levels of youth voter mobilization.

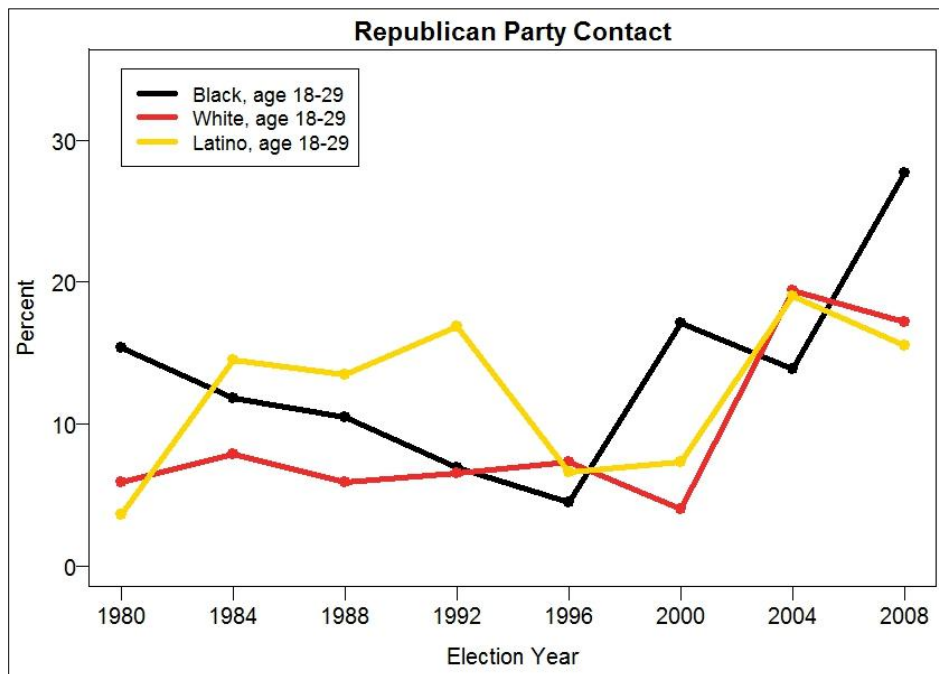
The 2012 election presents a key opportunity for the parties and for other unassociated groups to continue recent trends in mobilization. Many resources were poured into mobilization efforts in 2008, especially in key battleground states. There are likely to be even more battleground states in 2012, and mobilization efforts may play a key role in helping to maintain 2008 levels of voter turnout, especially among young black voters.

Figure 1: Mobilization by Race among Youth, 1980–2008



Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

Figure 2: Mobilization by Race among Youth, 1980–2008

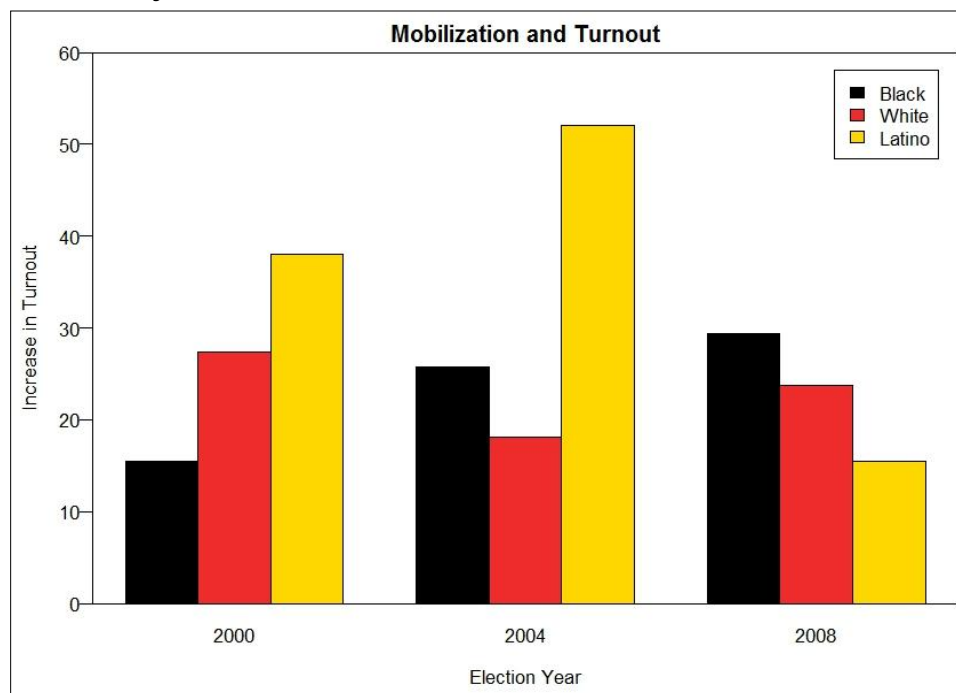


Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

## Mobilization Increases Voter Turnout

There is one simple reason the above statistics about mobilization are so important: mobilization works. People who are mobilized to vote often do so, and at very high rates. Figure 3 shows the differences in turnout rates between people who were and were not mobilized to vote. For the most part, turnout rates are between 15 and 30 percentage points higher among youth who reported being mobilized turned out to vote, compared to youth who were not contacted to vote. Mobilization of Latinos during the 2004 election appeared to be especially effective, as the George W. Bush reelection campaign sought specifically to target Latino voters in their get-out-the-vote efforts.<sup>2</sup> Among black youth, differences in turnout based on mobilization ranged from 16 to 29 percentage points, and from 18 to 27 points among white youth. Thus, increases in mobilization efforts may generate increased levels of voter turnout.

Figure 3: Party Mobilization and Increases in Voter Turnout, 2000–2008



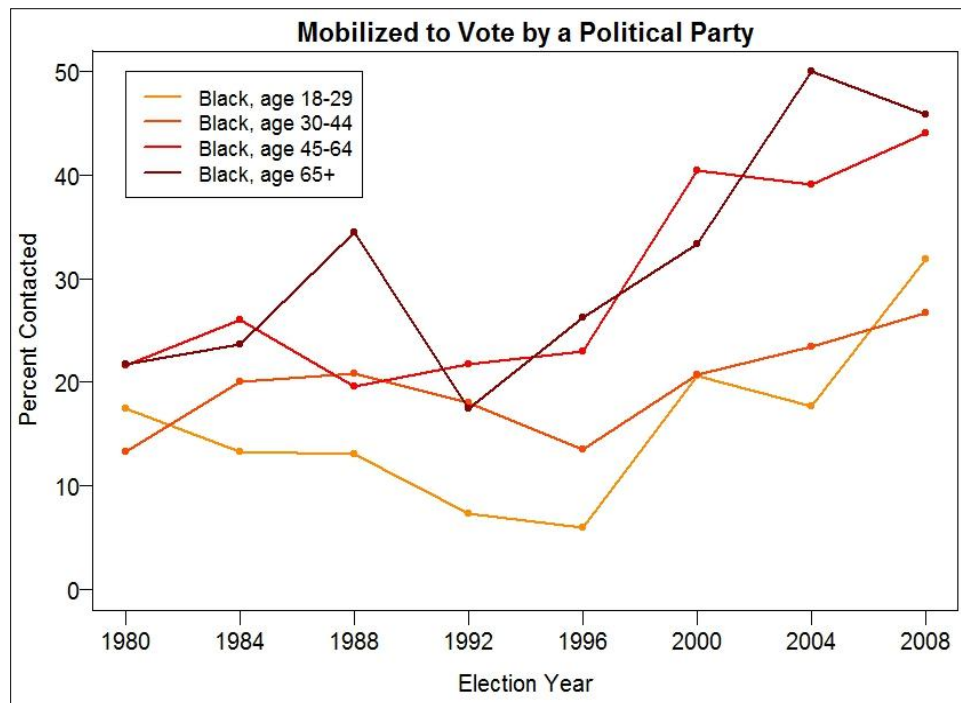
Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, “Bush Snags Much More of the Latino Vote, Exit Polls Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2004, A-30.

## Mobilization, Age, and Race

Though the figures above have made clear that mobilization efforts targeted at young people have increased in recent elections, black youth continue to be mobilized at much lower rates than older black citizens. Figure 4 compares party mobilization rates for black voters across four different age cohorts. The figure clearly shows that older people are more likely to be mobilized. There are many reasons for this; among them, older people are more likely to have lived in the same location for a longer period of time, which makes it easier for parties to locate them. However, even in 2008, blacks ages 45–64 and 65 and older were contacted by parties at nearly twice the rates of blacks ages 18–29. Furthermore, over the last thirty years, the rate at which older blacks have been contacted has increased at a much faster rate than the rate of contact for younger blacks. As figure 3 strongly indicates, increased attention to mobilizing young blacks could go a long way toward increasing young voter participation and closing the turnout gap between older and younger voters.

Figure 4: Blacks Mobilized by a Political Party by Age, 1980–2008

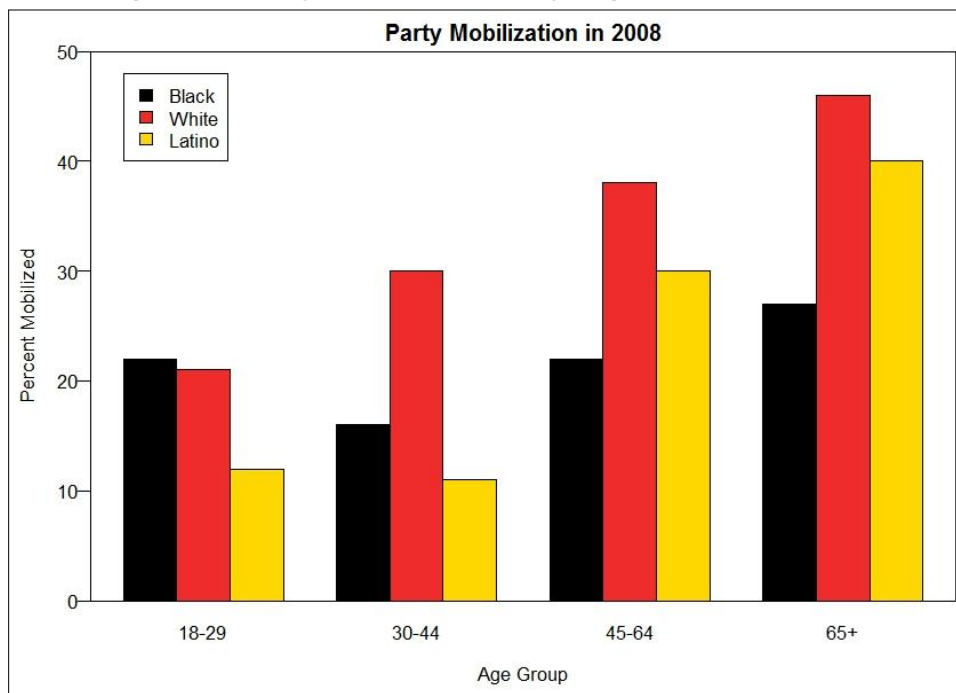


Source: American National Election Studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org>).



Taking a closer look at the 2008 election, we continue to see that across all racial groups, older people are mobilized at much higher rates. Moreover, with the exception of the youngest age cohort, whites are contacted by parties at much higher rates than blacks and Latinos. Furthermore, blacks ages 18–29 and 30–44 are contacted by parties at higher rates than Latinos, but Latinos ages 45–64 and 65 and older are contacted at higher rates than blacks in the same age category.

Figure 5: Party Mobilization by Age and Race, 2008



Source: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (<http://www.2008andbeyond.com>).

## Other Sources of Mobilization

As we indicated earlier, party contact need not be the only way in which people are mobilized to vote. Other organizations—both formal and informal—may also help motivate participation. People can even be mobilized to vote through involvement in their usual activities and informal social interactions.

Table 4 below shows that these nonparty sources play a significant role in encouraging young people to vote. More than 10 percent of respondents reported being encouraged to vote by their church, friends, colleagues, or classmates. These

figures vary in interesting ways across racial groups. Church remains a significant source of mobilization among young blacks (21 percent), but plays a lesser role in mobilization whites (10 percent) and Latinos (5 percent). Neighborhood and community organizations also mobilize young blacks at significantly higher rates (17 percent) than whites (3 percent) and Latinos (7 percent). Black youth also report being mobilized to vote by their friends at high rates (21 percent), but friends are not as important a source of mobilization for Latinos (6 percent) or whites (13 percent). People in the workplace are another important source of mobilization for all racial groups (whites and Latinos, 14 percent), especially for blacks (18 percent). Latinos, on the other hand, are mobilized significantly more by their classmates (19 percent) than are black (9 percent) and white (11 percent) youth.

Table 4: Sources of Nonparty Mobilization by Race, 2008 (Ages 18–29)

<b>Mobilization source</b>	<b>Black (%)</b>	<b>White (%)</b>	<b>Latino (%)</b>
Social organization	10	8	4
Youth group	8	3	7
Church group	21	10	5
Community organization	17	2	8
Friends/other people	21	13	6
Colleagues	18	14	14
Classmates	9	11	19

Source: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (<http://www.2008andbeyond.com>).

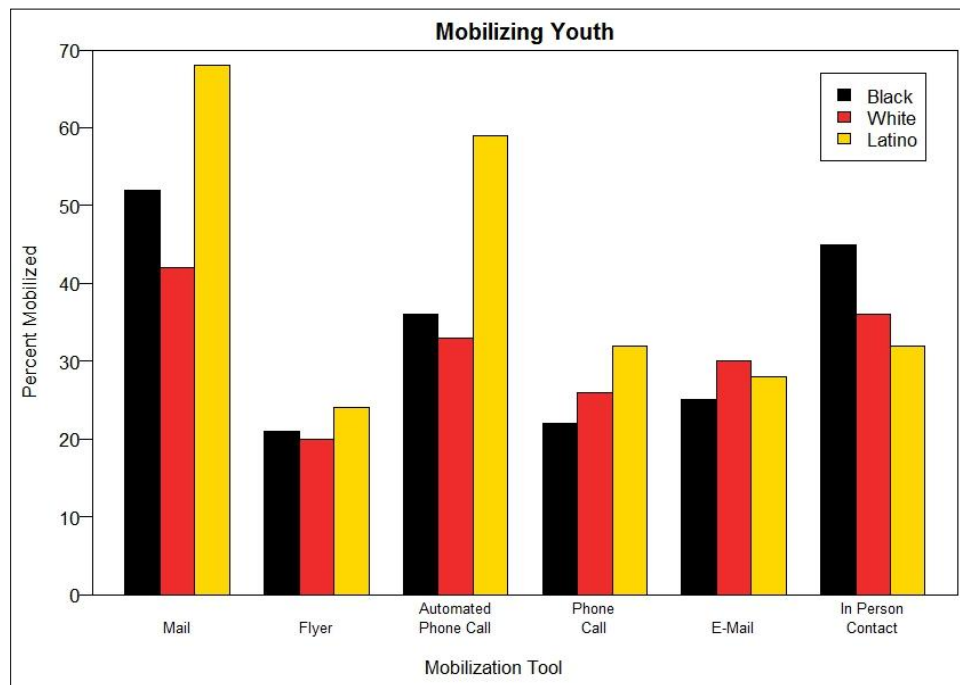
Political parties are likely to conduct mobilization efforts based upon their strategic electoral calculations. Thus, when black youth figure centrally into such calculations, they may be mobilized. If, however, they are not thought to play a central role in an election, it is unlikely that political parties will devote resources to mobilize young blacks. Because of this varying commitment to mobilizing young blacks on the part of political parties, it is critical that we focus on and support the informal processes by which young black people are motivated to participate in politics, since their efforts likely will be a successful way to maintain and increase levels of turnout among young black voters. In particular, the figure

below suggests that local community organizations, churches, and local “opinion leaders” are especially good targets for helping to increase turnout among young black adults. It is also worth mentioning that youth who are embedded in social networks stand a greater chance of being mobilized than youth who are less well connected to both formal and informal institutions. Thus, identifying and targeting these youth for voter mobilization could prove to be an especially promising way for boosting voter turnout.

## How Youth Are Mobilized

Figure 6 shows the ways in which people reported being mobilized during the 2008 presidential election. Traditional forms of communication, including postal mail, flyers, and phone calls, were commonly used forms of mobilization. Latinos received more mailings and automated phone calls than blacks and whites, but black youth reported substantially more in-person contacts than either Latinos or whites.

Figure 6: How Youth Are Mobilized, 2008 (Ages 18–29)



Source: Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (<http://www.2008andbeyond.com>).

Just as the ways that campaigns are conducted have changed, so too have the ways in which people receive information about and engage with politics. We have already seen how the rise of digital media has reshaped the ways candidates solicit donations, information is shared, and campaign volunteers are recruited. It also offers the potential to reach out to large numbers of people in a nearly costless way. Thus, we envision that e-mail, text messaging, and other forms of electronic communication will become increasingly important mobilization tools. Of course, this development also raises questions about how access to digital media is distributed across racial and age groups and how differential levels of access affect levels of mobilization and subsequent patterns of turnout.

## **Implications for 2012**

Mobilization is extremely important for increasing political participation and ensuring that electoral outcomes reflect the views of all Americans. The 2008 election illustrates this fact especially well, as historic levels of voter mobilization were accompanied by historic levels of voter turnout among black youth. Without these high levels of mobilization, the presidential election outcomes could have been different in a number of pivotal states, including Indiana and North Carolina.

The good news is that a variety of academic research indicates that voter turnout is habit forming. Once a person is encouraged to turn out to vote for the first time, he or she is likely to continue to participate in politics. Given the large number of first-time voters in 2008—many of them young people—this bodes well for voter turnout in 2012.

On the other hand, the voter mobilization efforts in 2008 were unprecedented. The Democratic presidential primary helped generate excitement and enthusiasm among young people, especially blacks, in advance of the general election. Without a Democratic primary in 2012, and given some likely voters' dissatisfaction with President Obama's performance, it may be unwise to rely on the parties and other electoral institutions to generate the same levels of mobilization as they did in 2012.

Instead, 2012 presents an opportunity for community and other local organizations to use their informal social ties to increase turnout. It is critical that community organizations, as well as national groups, direct some of their resources to mobilizing young people to vote. These activities should be especially concentrated among young people of color. Furthermore, not only should local and national organizations undertake their own mobilization efforts, they also should encourage people to engage their friends, family, colleagues, and classmates in conversations about politics and impress upon them the importance of voting. People tend to vote when they are encouraged to do so, and these informal mobilization tools have the potential to help generate increased levels of turnout. The outcome of the 2012 election may just depend on it.