

Forthcoming, 2006  
*American Behavioral Scientist*

Special Issue: *Young Citizens, Media  
and Political Participation*

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Racial Identity, Ideology and the Youth Vote:  
Observations From the 2004 Presidential Campaign

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## Abstract

This paper addresses voter turnout and candidate support among African American and Hispanic youth in the 2004 presidential election by exploring the relationship between rhetorical messages and racial identity factors known to influence voting behavior. These factors include a sense of collective identity and political cynicism for blacks, and wedge-issue politics and Hispanic-voter contact for Latinos. The successes and failures of the presidential candidates and their supporting organizations are linked to the degree that their respective rhetorical strategies were or were not commensurate with these factors.

Key Words: African Americans, Hispanics, identity, cynicism, wedge-issues, voter contact

## Racial Identity, Ideology and the Youth Vote: Observations From the 2004 Presidential Campaign

### Introduction

It is plausible that the increase in minority youth voter turnout, especially among blacks and Hispanics, was due in part to massive voter mobilization efforts that targeted these groups with a variety of persuasive messages. However, previous research offers us little in terms of what we know about how political campaign rhetoric might affect minority voters' decision-making (Valentino et al., 2002), including the decision to go vote. Research suggests that political cynicism, engagement and efficacy are consistent factors contributing to patterns of mobilization among African Americans (Mangum, 2003; Southwell & Pirch, 2003). Differently than their black minority counterparts, however, research demonstrates that wedge-issue politics, and Hispanic outreach to other Hispanics seems to better explain much of Latino voter mobilization (Cassell, 2000; Shaw, de la Garza & Lee, 2001; Michelson, 2004; Pantoja, Ramirez & Segura, 2000).

The presumption of this paper is that there is much to be gained by trying to understand what we don't know (how minority voters respond to persuasive messages) in relationship to what we do know (why blacks and Hispanics are motivated to vote). That is, addressing minority youth voters' responses to prominent persuasive appeals aimed at them in the 2004 election in relationship to demonstrated differential patterns of voting mobilization will help to explain the voting outcomes of minority youth in terms of voter turnout and support for the two presidential candidates. I argue specifically that the rhetorical strategies used by the two candidates and their respective supporting organizations effected voting outcomes as they did, precisely because of their affinity with the aforementioned theoretical frameworks for understanding black and Hispanic voting behavior. In the following pages I briefly describe the nature of the disparate rhetorical strategies aimed at black and Hispanic voters by the left and the right and explain their

respective successes and failures by examining the ways in which they coincided with the theoretical explanations of voting behavior of the respective minority groups.

#### Race & the Youth Vote in 2004

According to Lopez and Kirby (2005) we see that while voter turnout amongst those aged 18-24 significantly increased for members of all racial groups, these increases were apparent for some more than others. White and black youth turnout margins were about equal (12 percent and 11 percent respectively). The difference in turnout percentage between 2000 and 2004 was more pronounced amongst Black and Hispanic voters, however; the latter group posted an increase of only 7 percent beyond 2000 levels. In comparison to voters aged thirty and above, white and Hispanic voters aged 18-24 marked the greatest gap in turnout rate (21 percent and 19 percent respectively). The gap for blacks was somewhat lower at 17 percent. Support for Bush and Kerry was almost evenly split amongst white voters aged 18-24, though most voted for Bush (+3 percent). The gap in support of the two presidential candidates was starkly contrasted amongst the two largest racial minority groups, African Americans and Hispanics. While blacks' support for Kerry was overwhelming (88 percent), Hispanic support for him was only a modest 58 percent, allowing Bush to garner (arguably) 40 percent of the Hispanic youth vote.

The most interesting summary results from the 2004 election cycle were: the drastic increase in African American youth voter turnout, which eclipsed that of all other racial minority groups; the degree to which African American youth voted in concert with those of previous generations in terms of their ideological and political support for John Kerry, despite the growing diversity of public opinion positions taken on substantive political issues (Myers, Pritchett & Kennedy, 2003); the stark contrast in ideological and political support for Kerry and Bush amongst blacks and Hispanics; and the ability for Bush to gain increasing support (although minimal) from among older cohorts of African Americans—what seems to be a direct result of the differential targeting between Bush and Kerry of persuasive messages to black voters.

### Vote or Die: A Black Appeal on the Left

“Vote or Die” was the most prominent rhetorical trope (among several other persuasive messages) that characterized the persuasive appeals of the Kerry campaign, the Democratic Party, and allied leftist organizations that sought to increase registration and voter mobilization of minority youth in general, and African American youth in particular. The “Vote or Die” slogan was the official slogan of Hip-Hop mogul Sean “Puffy” Combs’ “Citizen Change,” an organization created to register and mobilize the youth vote in 2004. The “Vote or Die” trope, however, was co-opted by similar organizations, such as the “Hip-Hop Action Summit Network,” by countless Democratic Party elected officials from Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) to Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), and political activists in urban centers across the U.S. While these campaigns and their dominant trope were universal in their appeal to youth of all races, its primary rhetorical appeal was to African American youth. Those who championed and communicated the trope most often were the most prominent figures of hip-hop culture. Their message was aimed at urban centers with high concentrations of black youth, communicated through urban media outlets that attract young black listeners, and supported by institutions such as urban public schools, black churches and historically black colleges and universities who gave the movement’s spokespersons access to their respective black audiences.

But what is the significance of this rhetorical appeal—the use of the “Vote or Die” trope—to mobilize black youth? Why was it, at least in principle, an effective persuasive strategy? I argue that this rhetorical strategy was effective because it: appealed to black youth’s sense of collective identity and political efficacy that sought to bind not only black youth together, but to signal their connection to an older generation of older black voters; appealed to this sense of identity instead of focusing on substantive ideological or political issues of seeming import to African Americans; was communicated by people who belonged to not only a racial, but a cultural community that they had strong affinity for and identification with; was able to tap

into a sense of political cynicism, which for African Americans, typically increases rather than decreases levels of political engagement.

The trope “Vote or Die” is a direct reference to, and rearticulation of Malcolm X’s phrase the “the ballot or the bullet,” first used in a 1964 speech delivered in Cleveland, Ohio, in which Malcolm emphasized the urgency of political engagement by African Americans. He first utters the phrase saying, “If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out—time has run out (Malcolm X, 1964)!” The dichotomized wording of the phrase was used by Malcolm to communicate both the temporal urgency of blacks taking action to influence their own political future, as well as a sense of solidarity that obliterated the differences in approach to such action prevalent at that time. This is seen in the statements immediately preceding the “ballot or the bullet” statement, where Malcolm says,

Whether we are Christians or Muslims or nationalists or agnostics or atheists, we must first learn to forget our differences. If we have differences, let us differ in the closet; when we come out in front, let us not have anything to argue about until we get finished arguing with the man. If the late President Kennedy could get together with Khrushchev and exchange some wheat, we certainly have more in common with each other than Kennedy and Khrushchev had with each other.

This restatement, in the “Vote or Die” rhetorical appeal in 2004, had its basis in Malcolm X’s original appeal, and sought to downplay the generational differences between African American youth, and Civil Rights era adults who increasingly differ in terms of their political ideology, stances on “black” political issues from affirmative action to racial profiling to school choice, and their articulation of the political issues they say most concern them. It was a compelling trope because of its ability to stress this sense of collective identity and solidarity, while also drawing on the sense of urgency that characterized the black political struggles of the sixties. It

was also able to draw on a climate of political cynicism among blacks that was largely unparalleled in post-civil rights-era political memory. To a certain degree, the use of the “Vote or Die” trope elevated an enemy that increased the level of cynicism blacks had about politics and general, and the Bush administration in particular, specifically connected to two primary circumstances: the barriers to black voting in the 2000 election, and the conditions related to those dying in the Iraq war—young servicemen and women who were largely young, black or members of other racial minority groups. In the end, the “Vote or Die” strategy among black youth targeted all of the right impulses that contributed to their historical levels of voter turnout, as well as their overwhelming support for John Kerry.

#### Taken for Granted?: Black Counter Appeals on the Right

For at least the last decade, the Republican Party has made concerted efforts to recruit more African American support. In the 2004 election Bush, who had receive increased votes from the black community in 2000, refused to concede this constituency to Kerry and the Democrats. Bush and related organizations on the right used a divide and conquer strategy to target and recruit black voters. The strategy was aimed at the interrelated areas of political ideology (primarily one of conservative morality) and age. This is to say that in order to maximize the potential influence of their persuasive rhetoric, they targeted older African Americans, almost at the expense of young black voters.

The rhetorical appeal primarily used by Bush and his supporters amplified a question (to the point of assertion) oft ask by those on the right to African American wedded to the Democratic Party: Is the Democratic Party taking your vote for granted? This strategy—a rhetorical question to be sure—was communicated differently than the left’s tactics used to court black youth. It was communicated in urban centers, but on news stations by and large, as opposed to music stations, and the speakers in the various advertisements were identifiably older blacks. Those who carried the message in more interpersonal and face-to-face group interactions

were members of older generations—established professionals, clergy, and “official” black Republican spokespersons. But it was the message raised by the rhetorical question that most signaled older blacks, rather than younger, as their primary targets. The question of being taken for granted is one that can only really resonate with individuals who have lived long enough to have witnessed and been involved with the long history of black-democratic party affiliation. Only members of this demographic could reasonably reflect on, and be motivated to seriously entertain such a question.

While the left’s appeal to youth voters primarily relied on the emotional nature of what the trope signified, the right’s appeal to older voters was a rational one—does it make logical sense to categorically and without question align oneself and one’s racial group to one party, when that effectively diminishes the individual and collective power of members of that minority group to demand certain things of that party? The question is rational, utilitarian, and meant to persuade older blacks to question whether their singular alignment really wielded any power at all. This particular rhetorical strategy, utilized by the Bush campaign and prominent allied organizations such as “People of Color United”—was sound, especially given the degree of conservatism that still permeates older generations of blacks (especially on issues such as homosexuality) and the degree to which this demographic of African Americans have jumped into the proverbial “persuadable” column over the past decade by identifying themselves less with Democrats, not necessarily more with Republicans, but as Independents (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, cited in Myers, Pritchett & Kennedy, 2003). This signaled some possible persuasive ground to be gained by Bush and the Republicans.

Bush’s elevation of blacks and other minorities to prominent offices in his first administration greatly buttressed the persuasiveness of this appeal, yet it was largely unsuccessful because of the perception that its proponents lacked credibility. First, the way Bush won the election in 2000—what many older generation of African Americans saw as reminiscent

of Jim Crow and Civil Rights era barriers to voting—was elevated in the discourse of the 2004 election. Second, by the 2004 campaign cycle two of the most prominent blacks in Bush's cabinet were perceived by many blacks as being ineffectual. Secretary of State Colin Powell was viewed as having been a pawn and betrayed by Bush in the deliberations that led to the Iraq war, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice had come to be seen as simply a “yes” woman who wielded little real influence. These two factors that swirled in the everyday election discourse in 2004, worked to nullify the official strategy Bush and the right used to counter increased voter mobilization of young black voters on the left by seeking to diminish support for Kerry among older generations of African Americans.

### The Latino Wild Card

Forty percent or more Hispanic youth overall voted for President Bush. Bush gained his highest levels of Hispanic support (among voters of all ages) in Florida (56 percent) and Texas (49 percent); his lowest, at least amongst the battleground states, was in Colorado (30 percent). What might be a plausible explanation for this unexpected increase in support for Bush among Hispanics in general, and Hispanics youth (to a lesser, but significant degree), in terms of the persuasive messages aimed at them by the two presidential candidates? As previously mentioned, research demonstrates that Hispanics and African Americans in general are motivated to vote and support political candidates for very different reasons. Blacks' sense of collective identity and group solidarity, political efficacy, cynicism and level of engagement influences such decisions, while Hispanic voters are motivated to vote and support particular candidates under two primary conditions: when political messages aimed at them revolve around wedge-issues; and when voter contact is made by another Hispanic individual. Both of these stem from, the fact that Hispanic identity is much more fractured than African Americans' for many reasons; among these are differences in Hispanic immigration and naturalization patterns, and the degree to which many Hispanic Americans identify more strongly with their nation of

origin, than other Hispanic citizens in the U.S. from disparate national backgrounds.

Both Bush and Kerry benefited from power that Hispanic voter contact has on potential Hispanic voters—Kerry in the key battleground state of Colorado, Bush in the important state of Florida. Data is not available to determine the exact amount of face-to-face Hispanic voter contact made in these two states, however, one important form of such contact was apparent: each state featured a prominent Hispanic candidate on the ballot for statewide office. In Colorado, Democrat Ken Salazar, a Mexican-American elected to the U.S. Senate, garnered the majority of Hispanic votes, as did John Kerry. In Florida, Mel Martinez, a Cuban immigrant and newly elected senator, won the majority of Hispanic votes, as did George W. Bush. It is likely that these prominent figures just below Bush and Kerry on their respective ballots, inspired the kind of trust and assurances typically perceived by Hispanic voters who are appealed to by other Hispanics.

In other states with large Hispanic populations, the Bush edge among older Hispanics, and Hispanic youth (whose supported Bush to a lesser, but still significant and increased amount), can be attributed in part to the degree to which Bush utilized a wedge-issue message strategy equally among older and younger Hispanic voters, while Kerry targeted only older Hispanics with such a message. Put simply, Kerry and the Democrats generally played up wedge-issue political appeals among older-generation Hispanics, but largely targeted Hispanic youth with the same message of collective identity and solidarity used to appeal to black youth, while Bush relied more broadly on such wedge-issue appeals. In addition, such wedge-issue appeals by Bush were more specifically and pointedly at Hispanics both old and young alike.

Kerry and the Democrats seem to have reasoned that older Hispanics needed more persuading as to who to vote for while young Hispanics, like young blacks (and youth in general), mainly needed to be motivated to actually get to the polls on election day, assuming increased mobilization would translate into increased support among Hispanic youth. In doing so

they made the crucial mistake of lumping Hispanic youth into the same persuasive audience with all other minority groups, and thus targeted them with the same rhetorical message. While Kerry did appeal to Hispanics in general with messages about substantive political issues—“wedge” issues—the specific messages targeted to Hispanic youth largely coincided with, and were dominated by the same appeals to African American youth. It was a failure then to target a group of people who lack, compared with blacks, a strong sense of collective identity or cohesive political efficacy with the same message meant to appeal to this sense of racial solidarity. Kerry and those on the left would have likely increased their support among Hispanic youth if they had more directly targeted the youth with the same wedge-issue type appeals as were aimed at Hispanic adults.

Bush, on the other hand, did focus most of his television advertising and campaign speeches on this kind of wedge-issue politics that Hispanics old and young seem to respond to. Differently than Kerry, such appeals by Bush were generally more negative (and therefore successful in this context), and differentially targeted towards different Hispanic constituencies. For instance, in New Mexico and Texas he cut into Democratic support among Hispanics by talking about border issues such as immigration, supporting illegal immigrant workers, naturalizing illegal immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for long periods of time, and other such issues aimed at Mexican-American concerns about the relationship of Mexican-Americans with their families and politics of Mexico itself. In Florida, Bush was quite successful at increasing turnout and support amongst Cuban Americans who have typically supported the Republican Party. To this group Bush played up anti-Castro sentiment, while painting Kerry as a Castro sympathizer.

### Conclusion

While this paper does not empirically test the effect of rhetorical messages on African American and Hispanic voters, it does provide a reasonable argument about the successes and

failures of the respective presidential candidates' rhetorical strategies to mobilize and garner support from the youth cohort among these two minority constituencies. The degree to which such strategies appear to mirror established findings regarding patterns of mobilization and candidate support, however, should serve to invite increased empirical exploration into the veracity of persuasive message strategies targeted these groups as a whole. More specific study on the impact of such messages on young voters of these racial groups is warranted in light of the increasing growth in the population of young Hispanics and the seeming increasing levels of civic engagement by both black and Hispanic youth alike.

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