

Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes  
Toward Politics and Public Service:  
22nd Edition

Institute of Politics, Harvard University



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#HarvardPoll

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# Introduction

Conceived by two Harvard undergraduate students during the winter of 1999, Harvard University's Institute of Politics Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service began in 2000 as a national survey of 18- to 24-year old college undergraduates. Over the last twelve years, this research project has grown in scope and mission, as this report now includes an analysis of 18- to 29-year olds on a broad set of longitudinal and current events issues.

## Methodology

The first survey of N=800 college undergraduates was completed in the Spring of 2000 and all interviews were conducted over the telephone; since that time, 21 subsequent surveys have been released. Over this period, a number of modifications have been made to the scope and methodology in order to ensure that sampling methods most accurately capture the view of the population of young adults in a manner that will be useful to both the Institute of Politics and the broader research and political communities.

- In 2001, the survey was expanded from N=800 to N=1,200 college students in order to capture a more robust sample of the undergraduate population.
- In 2006, the survey expanded to N=2,400 interviews, as we began interviewing members of the 18- to 24-year-old cohort who were not currently attending a four-year college or university. In addition, because of changing uses of technology among younger Americans, in 2006 the survey moved from a telephone poll to a survey that was administered online.
- In 2009, we expanded our scope a third time to include the population of young

adults aged 18 to 29. While we will continue to report on the attitudes and opinions of U.S. college students, this change in our research subject was made to allow for better and more direct comparisons to the broader set of election and general public opinion research tracking data, which tends to track the 18- to 29-year-old demographic group. Our Fall political tracking surveys will include samples of N=2,000 while the Spring semester's research project will be more in-depth and include N=3,000 interviews. All of our interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish. Using Knowledge Networks as our research partner, the Institute of Politics surveys use RDD and Address-Based Sampling (ABS) frames and are administered online (see Appendix for more information).

The interviewing period for this survey of N=2,123 18- to 29-year olds was September 19 to October 3, 2012. The margin of error for the poll is +/- 2.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. During the interviewing period, major media stories included fallout from the Benghazi attacks, Mitt Romney's 47% comment was leaked, Romney's tax summary document was released, Obama and Romney both appeared on 60 Minutes, and Obama spoke to the UN. The first presidential debate was held the night that our poll was completed.

IOP Polling Director John Della Volpe supervised the survey group of undergraduate students. As always, the IOP survey group would like to thank IOP Director Trey Grayson and Executive Director Catherine McLaughlin for their insight and support over the course of this and all IOP projects.

## Demographic and Political Profile

For this survey, we completed N=2,123 web-enabled interviews with 18- to 29- year-olds in the United States.

### Demographic profile:

- 50 percent male, 50 percent female;
- 59 percent are between the ages of 18 and 24; 41 percent are between the ages of 25 and 29;
- 58 percent White (non-Hispanic), 20 percent Hispanic, 13 percent African-American (non-Hispanic), 7 percent other and 2 percent 2+ races;
- 20 percent are Catholic, 13 percent Protestant, 12 percent Fundamental/Evangelical, 2 percent Jewish, 2 percent Mormon, less than one percent Muslim, 8 percent another religion, 24 percent cite no religious preference, and 11 percent decline to answer;
- 48 percent with a religious preference say that religion is a very important part of their life, 33 percent say that it is somewhat important and 16 percent say it is not very important.
- 23 percent are married, 15 percent are living with a partner, 1 percent are divorced, 1 percent are separated and 59 percent have never been married;
- 85 percent use a cell phone, 22 percent use a landline, and 2 percent use VOIP;
- 91 percent have Internet access at home.

### Current educational status:

- 12 percent of the sample indicated that they are in a two-year junior or community college, 22 percent in a four-year college, 4 percent in graduate school, 2 percent in a business or professional school, 1 percent are not enrolled but taking at least one class, and 54 percent of 18- to 29- year olds surveyed are not enrolled in any of these categories;
- 78 percent of college students attend a public institution, 20 percent a private one;
- 49 percent of students attend college in an urban area, 30 percent in a suburb and 18 percent in a small town or rural area.

### Political and ideological profile:

- 67 percent say they are registered to vote;
- 25 percent consider themselves to be politically engaged or active;
- 37 percent self-identify as liberal or leaning liberal, 30 percent moderate, and 33 percent conservative or leaning conservative;
- 36 percent consider themselves Democrats, 24 percent Republicans, and 37 percent Independents;
- 10 percent are supporters of the Tea Party.

### Employment status:

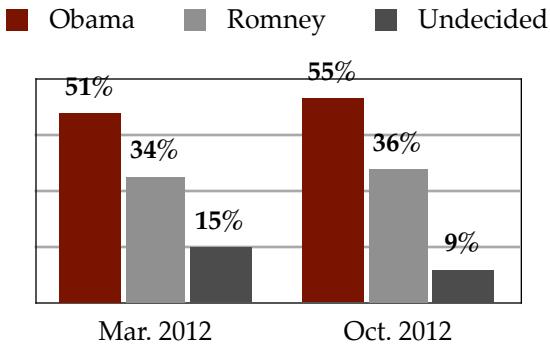
- 58 percent are working as a paid employee, 4 percent are self-employed, and 20 percent are looking for work.

# Obama on Solid Footing as More Trust Him to Deal with Major Issues; Paul Ryan Pick Not Helpful to Romney Campaign's Outreach to Young

## Obama's Lead Among Likely Young Voters Increases Slightly Since Spring 2012 Poll

At the time that this survey was completed on October 3, President Barack Obama held a 19 percentage point lead over former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney among likely young voters<sup>1</sup> under the age of 30. Obama's lead of 55 percent to 36 percent (with nine percent undecided) is a slight improvement from the poll that the Institute of Politics conducted in the Spring of 2012, where Obama's lead was 17 points among likely voters. Of the six percentage points that moved away from the undecided column since the Spring survey, four points went to Obama, two to Romney.

IF THE ELECTION FOR PRESIDENT WERE HELD TODAY..., FOR WHOM WOULD YOU VOTE? - LIKELY VOTERS ONLY -



When all members of the 18- to 29- year old cohort are asked their preference (not just likely voters), Obama leads Romney by a wider mar-

gin, 48 percent to 26 percent. In March 2012, among this same group, Obama led 43 percent to 27 percent.

Following are the current preferences for likely voters within key subgroups of the electorate:

- College Voters: Obama leads among likely college voters by 10 points (48%-38%), with 13 percent undecided;
- Swing States: Obama leads among likely voters in Swing states<sup>2</sup> by 16 points (54%-38%); in Blue States by 34 points (61%-27%) and by 6 points in Red States (49%-43%).
- Gender: Obama leads among likely male voters by 16 (54%-38%); among likely female voters, he leads by 23 (56%-33%);
- Age: Obama leads 18- to 24- year olds by 15 points (52%-37%); among 25- to 29- year olds, he leads by 26 points (59%-33%);
- Race: Obama leads among Blacks by 85 points (91%-6%), Hispanics by 60 points (73%-13%), yet he trails Whites by 4 (47%-43%) -- a group he won by 10 in 2008;
- Political Party: Obama leads among likely Democratic voters by 90 points (92%-2%), Romney leads among Republicans by 81 points (66%-5%) -- and Obama leads among Independents by 23 points (52%-29%).

<sup>1</sup> Voters who responded in survey that they will "definitely be voting" in the upcoming election

<sup>2</sup> CO, FL, IA, MI, MN, NV, NH, NM, NC, OH, PA, VA, WI

With weeks before the election, both Obama and Romney voters seem steadfast in their preferences. More than nine-in-ten Romney (95%) and Obama (91%) voters tell us that they are either not very or not at all likely to change their mind before Election Day.

Among the young voters who tell us that they plan to vote to re-elect the President, 25 percent tell us in an open-ended question that they are voting for him because "he's doing a good job," 15 percent cite his connection and interest in "the middle class", and 12 percent cite that they are supporting Obama because they "dislike Mitt Romney."

Among Romney voters in our survey, 24 percent tell us they are supporting Romney because they "dislike President Obama," 16 percent cite his "business acumen," and ten percent cite his positions on "religious and social issues."

#### **Paul Ryan's Selection as Vice Presidential Nominee Not Considered Helpful**

When all 18- to 29- year olds were asked whether Mitt Ryan's selection of Paul Ryan made them more or less likely to support Romney, nine percent reported that the pick made them "much more likely to vote" for Mitt Romney -- while 40 percent said that it made them "much less likely."

- Among likely voters who are Democrats, three percent report that the pick made them "much more likely" to vote for Romney, 65 percent "much less likely;"
- Among likely Republicans, 34 percent say that the Ryan pick makes them "much more likely" to vote for Romney, six percent "much less likely;" and

- Among likely Independent voters, nine percent tell us that the Ryan pick makes them "much more likely" to support Mitt Romney, 37 percent say that it makes them "much less likely."

#### **President Obama More Trusted On Major Issues; Solid Majority Believe Problems He Inherited Are So Complex It Takes More Time**

Respondents in our survey were asked to indicate whether they trusted Barack Obama or Mitt Romney more to deal with several key issues at stake in this election. On every issue, from the economy to foreign policy to youth issues, young Americans indicated that they trusted President Obama more to handle the issue. The largest performance gaps, 30 points or slightly greater, were on issues "of concern to women" and "of concern to someone your age."

**PLEASE INDICATE WHICH CANDIDATE YOU TRUST MORE TO HANDLE...**

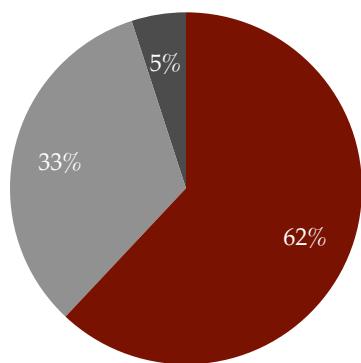
	TRUST OBAMA MORE	TRUST ROMNEY MORE
ISSUES OF CONCERN TO WOMEN	53%	20%
ISSUES OF CONCERN TO SOMEONE YOUR AGE	52%	21%
FOREIGN POLICY	47%	24%
HEALTH CARE POLICY	49%	26%
BE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF	46%	24%
IMMIGRATION REFORM	45%	25%
THE ECONOMY	47%	28%

Through qualitative research that we conducted across America this summer, we tested the framework that many young Americans (and the campaigns) seem to be using for the election. We asked our survey respondents, which of the following statements comes closest to their own view regarding President Obama:

- The problems that President Obama inherited are so complex it takes more than 4 years to do the job; or
- Despite his best efforts, President Obama has failed.

By a margin that is reminiscent of the margin of victory that Barack Obama had over John McCain among 18- to 29-year old voters in 2008<sup>3</sup>, 62 percent believe the statement that “the problems are so complex it takes more than 4 years to do the job,” comes closer to their view compared to “despite his best efforts, Obama has failed.”

#### WHICH STATEMENT COMES CLOSEST TO YOUR OWN VIEW REGARDING PRESIDENT OBAMA?



- Takes more than 4 years to do the job
- Obama has failed
- Refused

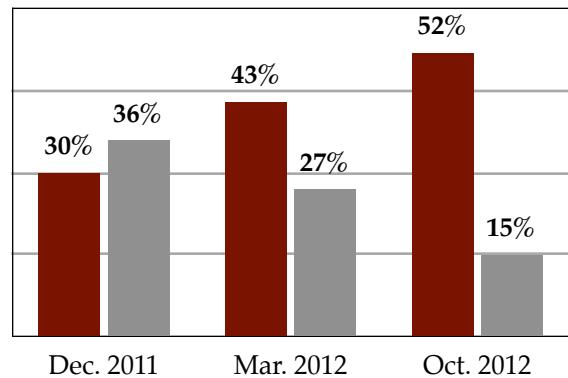
Among likely voters who remain undecided, by a statistically significant margin, more tell us that they agree more with the “it takes more than 4 years,” positioning compared to the one that reads “despite his best efforts, Obama has failed.”

#### Majority Foresee Obama Victory in November

Toward the end of 2011, when a united Republican field was pitched against the President, more young voters believed that Obama would lose re-election (36%) than win (30%). This, along with other data points, was used to illustrate that overall enthusiasm for the President’s re-election was significantly lower than levels from the historic 2008 campaign. In March, this question was repeated and we found that 43 percent said Obama would win, with 27 percent believing he will lose. Currently, 52 percent of 18- to 29-year olds voters believe he will win, 15 percent believe he will not. Among likely voters, 60 percent believe he will win, a marked improvement from our last two polls.

#### REGARDLESS OF WHICH CANDIDATE YOU SUPPORT - DO YOU BELIEVE THAT BARACK OBAMA WILL WIN OR LOSE RE-ELECTION?

█ Obama will win      █ Obama will lose

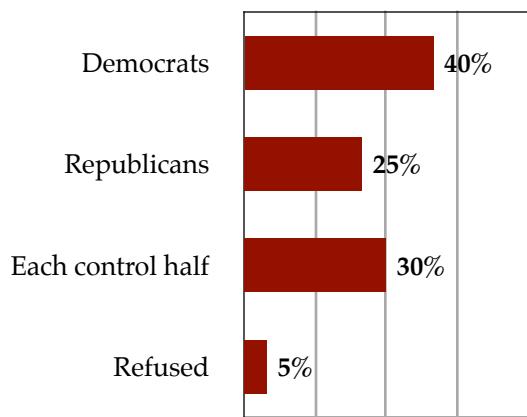


<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#>

## Plurality of Young Americans Prefer a Democratic Congress; Approval of GOP Congress Continues to Slide

When 18- to 29-year olds are asked which party they prefer controls Congress after the election, 40 percent chose Democrats, one-quarter (25%) chose Republicans, and 30 percent indicate that a split Congress is their preferred outcome.

### WHICH PARTY DO YOU WANT TO CONTROL CONGRESS AFTER THIS ELECTION?

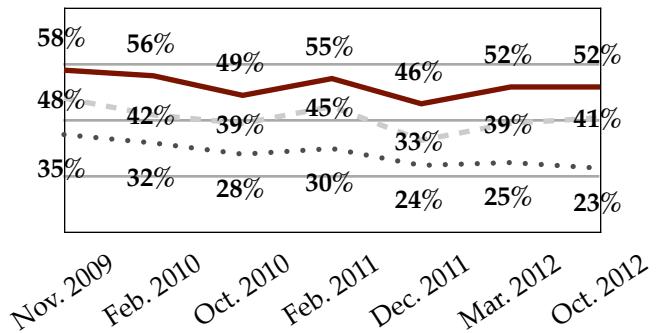


These opinions, and preference for Democratic control over Republican control, are also evident within the Congressional approval questions. At the time the poll was taken, 41 percent of 18- to 29-year olds indicated that they approved of the way that the Democrats were handling their job in Congress; and while a majority (54%) disapprove, the Democrats remain in a stronger position than Republicans at this time: 23 percent approve of the job that the GOP is doing in Congress, and 71 percent disapprove.

The approval rating of President Obama is similar to what it was in our March 2012 poll -- 52 percent approve, 43 percent disapprove, with five percent refusing the question. In March, 52 percent approved, 46 percent disapproved, with only two percent refusal.

### DO YOU APPROVE OR DISAPPROVE OF THE JOB PERFORMANCE OF \_\_\_\_: -- APPROVAL RATINGS --

- Barack Obama
- Democrats in Congress
- Republicans in Congress

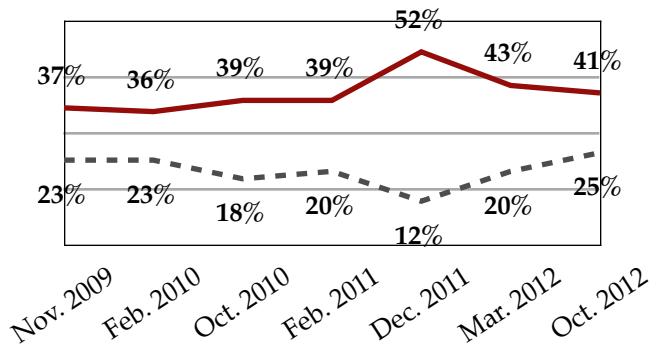


### More Believe We are Headed in the Right Direction; the Economy Remains Top Issue

More than three-in-five (61%) 18- to 29-year olds in America cite issues related to the economy as the primary issue facing the country at this time. Health care was the second most pressing issue, with 10 percent citing this as their top national issue; national security issues received 3 percent.

### ALL IN ALL, DO YOU THINK THAT THINGS IN THE NATION ARE ...

- Right direction
- Wrong track



# Enthusiasm Among 18- to 24 Year Olds is Down Across the Board; Romney Voters More Likely than Obama Voters to Participate

## Political Engagement Seen as Less Effective, Less than Half Plan to Definitely Vote

With less than one-in-five (19%) young Americans choosing political engagement over community volunteerism (31%)<sup>4</sup> as a better way to solve important issues facing the nation, this is yet another sign that the relationship between members of America's largest generation and their government is damaged.

In our survey, 67 percent of 18- to 29- year olds have indicated that they are registered to vote; 48 percent report that they will definitely vote on November 6, 10 percent say that they probably will vote, 16 percent say their chances of voting are 50-50 and 23 percent tell us that they probably (9%) or definitely (14%) will not be voting.

The young Americans most likely to vote in November include:

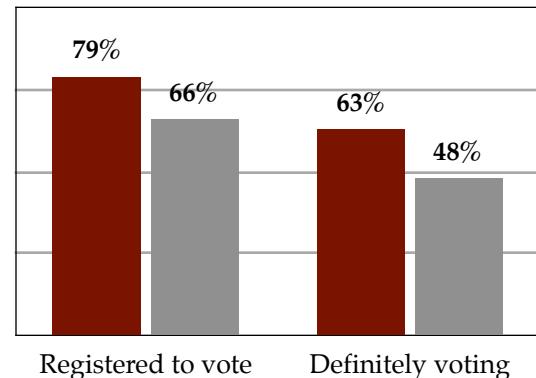
- Romney voters (65%) are more likely to say they will definitely vote compared to Obama voters (55%);
- A majority of Whites (54%) and African Americans (59%) report that they will definitely be voting, compared with less than one-third of Hispanics (31%);
- College (55%) and graduate school (58%) students are more likely to vote than those who do not have a college degree and are not in college (40%).

At this time in 2008, the Institute of Politics focused only on polling 18- to 24- year olds<sup>5</sup>. When the 2012 voting intentions of 18- to 24- year olds are compared to 2008 polls, the data suggest that in the upcoming election 18-to 24- year old turnout will be lower than the turnout in 2008 by a significant margin.

(1) WE UNDERSTAND THAT PLENTY OF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT REGISTERED TO VOTE, BUT WE ARE WONDERING IF YOU ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE? (2) HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT YOU WILL VOTE IN THE GENERAL ELECTION FOR PRESIDENT IN NOVEMBER?

- 18- TO 24- YEAR OLDS ONLY -

■ Oct. 2008 ■ Oct. 2012



In addition to 18- to 24- year olds in 2012 indicating that they are less likely to vote by 16 percentage points, the percentage who consider themselves to be politically active has also decreased from 43 to 22 percent when the 2008 and 2012 polls are compared.

<sup>4</sup> In general, which do you think is the better way to solve important issues facing the country?

<sup>5</sup> In 2008, Harris Interactive was our research partner and conducted our surveys; in 2009, we began working with Knowledge Networks.

## **Reasons Why Many Will Not Vote**

Our team conducted focus groups in August and September 2012 with young men and women who participated in the 2008 election, but are not likely to vote in November. In our Detroit group held on August 23, 2012, it was not uncommon to hear comments like this from young people not likely to vote in November:

*"I voted in 2008 for the same reason that Ashley did, because he was black. And I turned 18. And I'm like, yes, I can vote. And I'm going to make a change...the way I feel this year is, if I vote, I have to vote for the lesser of two evils. And it's not really like either one of them's going to make a change, in my opinion. One might make it a little bit worse than the other one will."*

And this:

*"It was really exciting and it was like this is a change, this is something different. This is history being made. And we're alive and we're here and we can participate in it...it was more like this was history and I'm involved in it. I had that mindset. And cool, my kids get to see this and grow up with this. And this is something my parents never thought they'd see. I never thought I'd see."*

When we ask likely non-voters<sup>6</sup> in our survey (39% of sample) a series of reasons (derived from the focus groups) why they may not vote, we learned that:

- 43 percent agree (either strongly or somewhat) that it doesn't matter who's elected, Washington is broken;
- 31 percent agree that it doesn't matter who's elected; none of the candidates represent my views;
- 25 percent agree that it doesn't matter who's elected; the parties are more or less the same;
- 24 percent agree that they only vote when they are passionately for or against one of the candidates;
- 20 percent agree that some elections are more important than others; they only vote when they think it's important; and
- 12 percent agree that they only vote when they think it will be a close election.

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<sup>6</sup> Those who say that the chances they vote are 50-50 and those who say they probably will not or definitely will not vote.

# The Youth Vote Speaks to Potential Hot Button Issues: Drones, Israel-Iran, Birth Control and the Bush Tax Cuts

## Views Toward Drones and Potential Conflict Between Israel and Iran

This semester's Harvard Public Opinion Project students expressed interest in their peers' attitudes toward several foreign policy initiatives, including the use of drones and support of Israel in the event that they attack Iran's nuclear capabilities.

In the case of drones, it is important to note that more than two-in-five young Americans did not offer an opinion one way or the other. Thirty-five percent (35%) approve of the United States conducting missile strikes from pilotless aircrafts called drones to target extremists in countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, 24 percent disapprove -- and 42 percent reported that they did not know. When it was reported to respondents that the drone targets could include United States citizens who are suspected terrorists -- the percent who supported the action decreased five percentage points to 30 percent (25% disapproved and 46% did not know).

In the hypothetical event that Israel attacks Iran in order to prevent it from developing a nuclear weapons program, a plurality (37%) believe that the United States should not get involved to support Israel's military action; 26 percent believe that the United States ought to get involved, and 34 percent did not know.

## Abortion, Birth Control and Bush Tax Cuts

In addition to several questions focused on potential foreign policy hot buttons, students also were interested in views toward abortion, the availability of birth control and the renewal of the 2001 Bush tax cuts.

On the issue of abortion,

- 32 percent believe that it should be permitted in all cases;
- 14 percent believe that it should be permitted, but subject to greater restrictions than it is now;
- 27 percent believe that it should be permitted only in cases such as rape, incest or to save the woman's life;
- 8 percent believe that it should only be permitted to save the woman's life; and
- 15 percent believe it should not be allowed at all.

Seventy-two percent (72%) of 18- to 29- year olds agree that doctors, hospitals, and insurance companies should provide birth control to all women who want it -- including 52 percent of Romney voters.

Regarding the issue of the "Bush tax cuts" from 2001, a plurality (32%) support allowing the tax cuts for people earning more than \$250,000 to expire, but continue them for other people, 23 percent support continuing the tax cuts for everyone, 10 percent support allowing the tax cuts to expire for everyone, and 31 percent had no opinion at this time.

## Conclusion

Through engagement with hundreds of students from the Institute of Politics and our partner schools, numerous focus groups with likely and less committed voters, and more than 7,000 detailed interviews over the last 12 months with members of America's Millennial generation, we have learned many things.

We have learned that young people of all ages, races and political persuasions care deeply about their community and their country. We have learned that young people continue to lose faith in the institutions and the leaders elected to govern our country and shape their future. And now, through this project, we have learned that potentially millions of young people will stay home on November 6, not participate in the election -- choosing instead other paths of civic engagement, or nothing at all.

While both the Romney and the Obama campaigns can find useful data points in this survey to bolster their campaigns, the most relevant and unfortunately troubling statistic is that fewer than half of young people under the age of 30 tell us that they "definitely will vote" for President on November 6. For young Hispanics and Latinos in the United States, that number is less than one-third.

Public opinion polling tells us that one of the few areas that a majority of Americans can agree on in 2012 is that Washington is broken.

We believe that the solutions to fixing government lie in the engagement of citizens -- and especially the 46 million 18- to 29-year olds who represent the largest generation in our nation's history, Millennials.

For those Millennials in their mid- to late-20's and early 30's, politics matters. It is highly relevant as their views were forged as teenagers from memories of burning buildings on 9/11, unpopular wars, an inadequate government response to Hurricane Katrina and a 2008 campaign of empowerment.

Their younger brothers and sisters have had a very different path to their first national election. Their path was one paved by the Great Recession, hyper-partisanship in Washington, unrest in the Middle East and fewer options for gainful employment at home.

In both cases, younger and older Millennials feel like they have done their job. They believe that the faith and the efforts awarded our leaders have been unmatched and under-appreciated.

They still yearn to make a difference to make America great, and it is our hope that in the final weeks of this campaign, both President Obama and Governor Romney alter their courses, connect with young people in more meaningful ways, and engage on the issues that will shape their future and ours. In the end, this is good politics; but even better for our country.

# Harvard Public Opinion Project

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Harvard's Institute of Politics (IOP) was established in 1966 as a memorial to President Kennedy and aims to inspire undergraduates to consider careers in politics and public service.

The Institute oversees the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum, one of the world's premier arenas for political speech, discussion, and debate, and runs a fellowship program offering a unique opportunity for political practitioners to spend semesters at Harvard and interact with students.

The IOP also offers dozens of paid internships for eight to ten weeks during the summer; a nonpartisan, quarterly journal written and run entirely by undergraduates; and a unique, nationwide survey project of young adults' political views.

Students are offered wide-ranging opportunities, including internships and conferences intended to provide opportunities for interaction with the people who shape politics and public policy. The IOP does not offer formal courses or degree-granting programs; instead, it provides avenues for practical experience and encourages students to examine critically and think creatively about politics and public issues. For more information, including past results of these polls, please visit us online at [www.iop.harvard.edu](http://www.iop.harvard.edu)

# Appendix

## Methodology

Knowledge Networks, now part of the GfK Group, conducted a study of young adults on political issues on behalf of Harvard University's Institute of Politics. The goal of the project was to collect 2,000 completed interviews with young Americans between 18- and 29- years old in English and Spanish. The main sample data collection took place from September 19 to October 3, 2012. A small pretest was conducted prior to the main survey to examine the accuracy of the data and the length of the interview.

Four thousand, nine hundred and twenty-seven (4,927) KnowledgePanel members were assigned to the study. The cooperation rate was 43.1 percent resulting in 2,123 completed interviews. One hundred and six (106) interviews were conducted in Spanish with the remainder done in English.

The web-enabled KnowledgePanel® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled KnowledgePanel®. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Knowledge Networks provides a laptop and ISP connection at no cost. People who already have computers and Internet service are permitted to participate using their own equipment. Panelists then receive unique log-in information for accessing surveys online, and are sent e-mails throughout each month inviting them to participate in research. More technical information is available at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>

[www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html) and by request to the IOP.

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## About Knowledge Networks

Knowledge Networks delivers quality and service to guide leaders in business, government, and academia – uniquely bringing scientifically valid research to the online space through its probability-based, online KnowledgePanel®. The company delivers unique study design, science, analysis, and panel maintenance, along with a commitment to close collaboration at every stage of the research process. Knowledge Networks leverages its expertise in brands, media, advertising, and public policy issues to provide insights that speak directly to clients' most important concerns. For more information: [www.knowledgenetworks.com](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com)