



**The Voting Behavior of Older Voters
in the 2008 General Election
and Prior Congressional Elections:
Implications for November 2010**

October 2010



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This report looks at the turnout patterns of voters age 45 and older (“older voters”) in General and Congressional Elections.

Chief findings include:

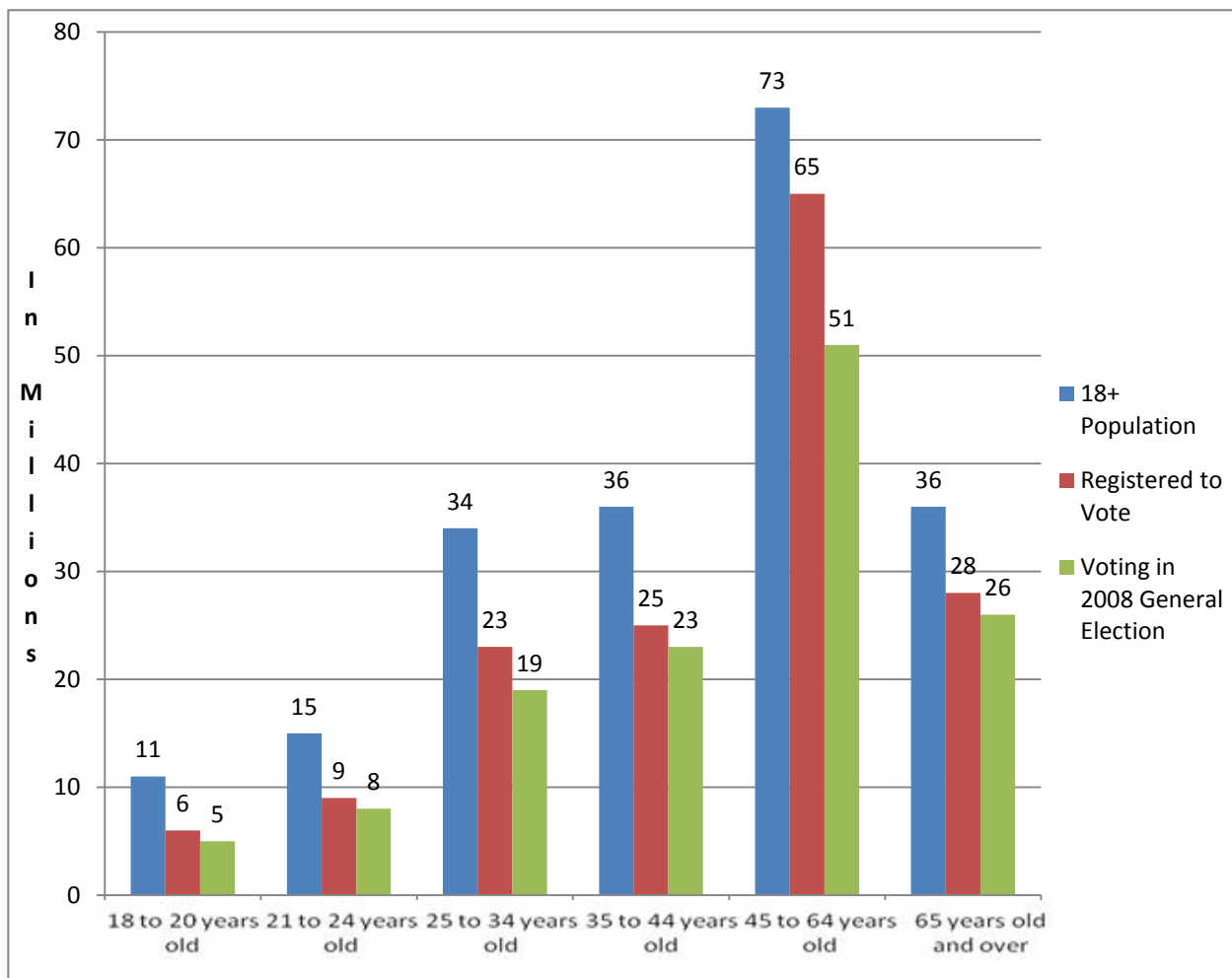
- The number of 45+ voters turning out in the 2008 General Elections was greater than the sum of voters in all remaining age groups.
- An estimated 69% percent of those age 45 or older voted in the 2008 General Election. For those between ages 18 and 44, 57% voted.
- In Congressional Elections, the propensity to vote increases with each successive age cohort. No greater than 20% of those age 18 to 24 voted in prior Congressional Elections; for those 65 and older, no fewer than 60% voted in Congressional Elections.
- The overrepresentation of older voters in Congressional Elections has increased consistently over time. In 1994, those age 45 and older represented 56% of those voting in Congressional Elections. By 2006, older voters represented 65% of those voting.
- If current voter turnout trends continue, more than two-thirds of voters in the 2010 Congressional election will be 45 or older.

Registration and Turnout for Older Voters

Recent Context- The 2008 General Elections

The absolute number of older Americans in the population, as well as the numbers of older voters registering and turning out to vote, makes the older voter a crucial segment of eligible voters. Figure 1 illustrates these general points with data from the most recent national election.

Figure 1. Overall 18+ Population Entitled to Vote (“Citizens”), the Population Registered to Vote and the Population Voting in the 2008 General Election (in Millions), by Age Groupⁱ



The number of 45+ voters turning out in the 2008 General Elections is greater than the sum of voters in all remaining age groups. This is due partly to Americans age 45 or older being a relatively large cohort in the citizen population (representing 53% of the eligible voter population), but also due to different voting behaviors between younger and older voters. Figure 2. looks at the relationship between voter turnout and age.

Figure 2. Percentage of Age Group Turning out to Vote in the 2008 General Election

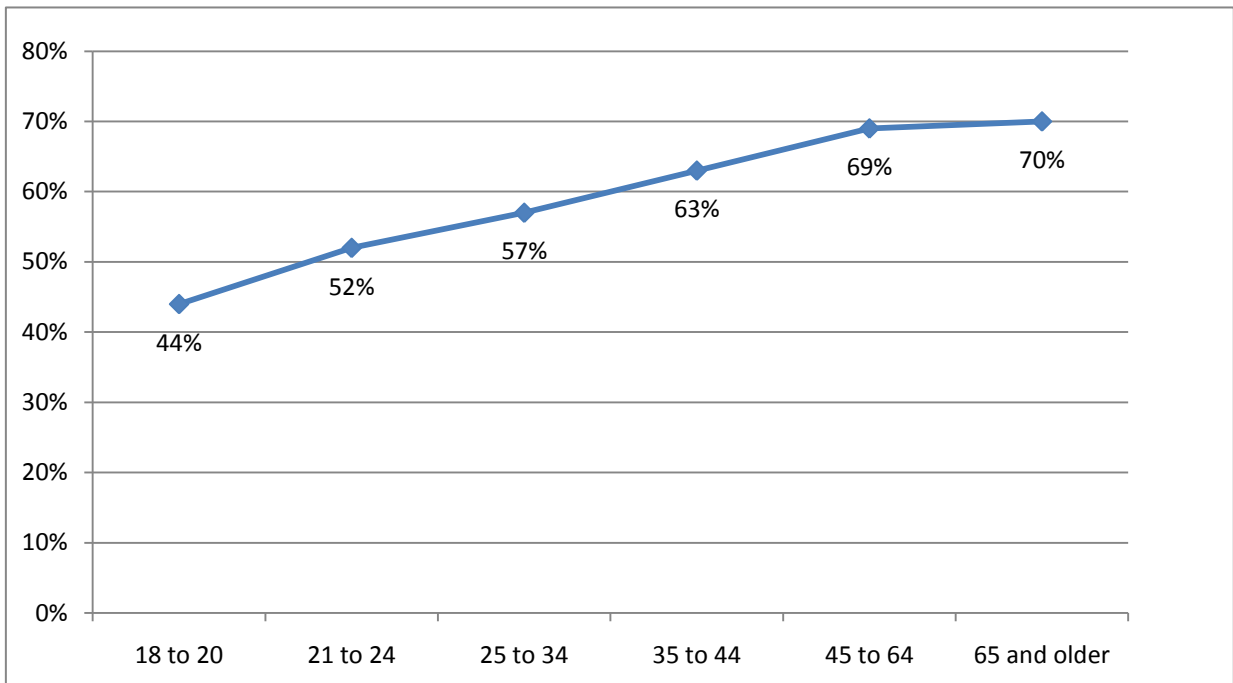


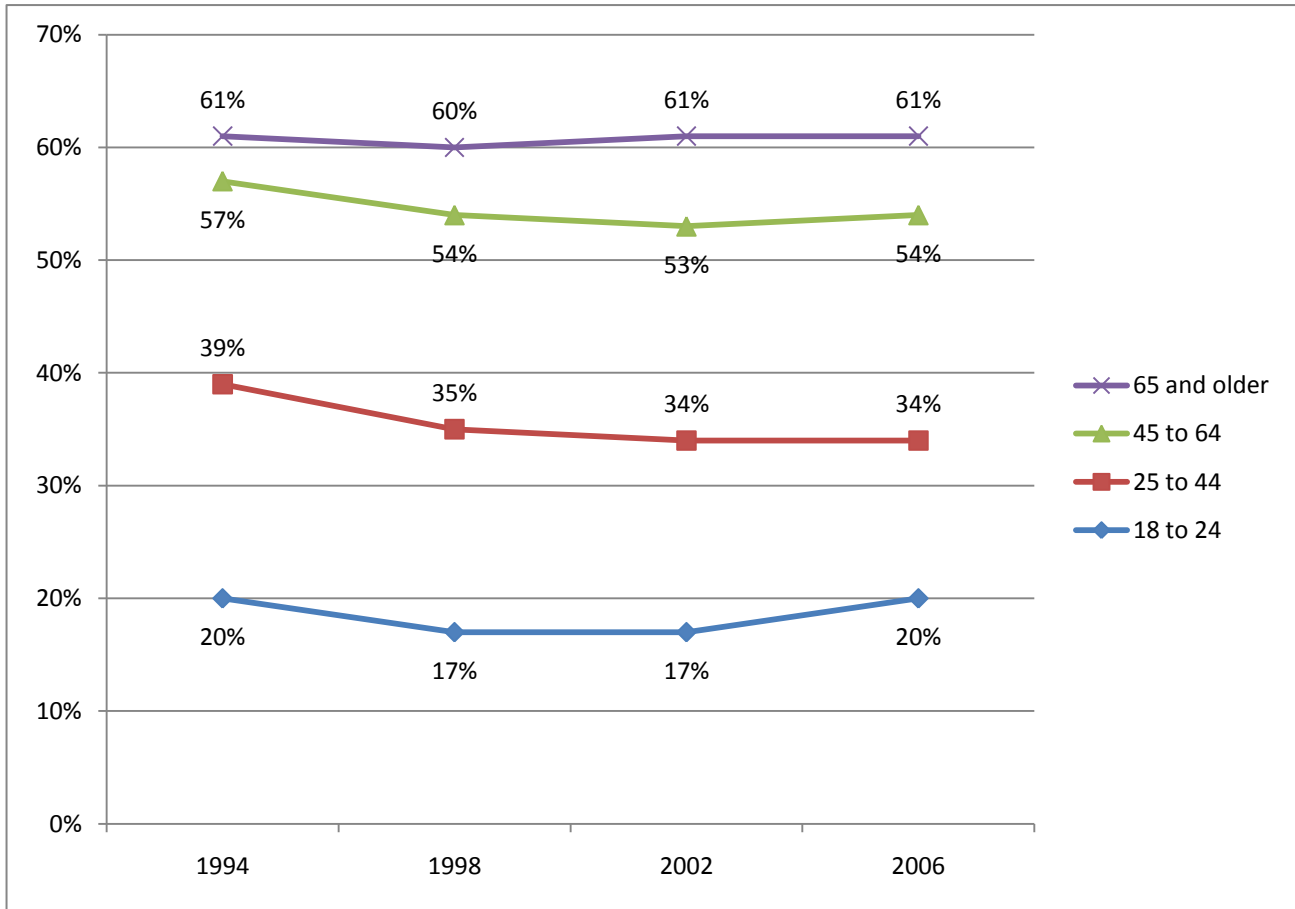
Figure 2 presents a trendline in which a greater propensity to vote is associated with age. Specifically, older voters had a greater propensity to vote in the most recent General Election than did younger people who were also eligible to vote. An estimated 69% percent of those age 45 or older voted in the 2008 General Election. For those between ages 18 and 44, 57% voted.

The large number of older Americans currently registered to vote, and the relatively high percentage of these older registered voters turning out for the 2008 General Election, lead to the 45+ population accounting for nearly 6 in 10 (58%) of 2008 General Election voters. This margin of disproportionate representation of older voters may not appear impressive if it were not for the fact that the 2008 General Election represented a historical high for *youth* turnout. Though overrepresented to some degree in General Elections, figures suggest that the 45+ voter is relatively more determinative in *Congressional Elections*.

Past Voting Behavior- Previous Congressional Elections

“Midterm Elections” include races for the entirety of the U.S. House of Representatives and races for about a third of the U.S. Senate seats. They are nearly synonymous with “Congressional Elections” although, depending on state-level election policy, non-Congressional races may be on the ballot (generally gubernatorial and [State] Senate races). Although the term “Congressional Elections” is used throughout, it should be noted that voting behaviors and public attitudes in advance of these elections will also affect non-Congressional races appearing on midterm ballots. Figure 3 shows the voting behavior of differing age groups over the last several Congressional Elections.

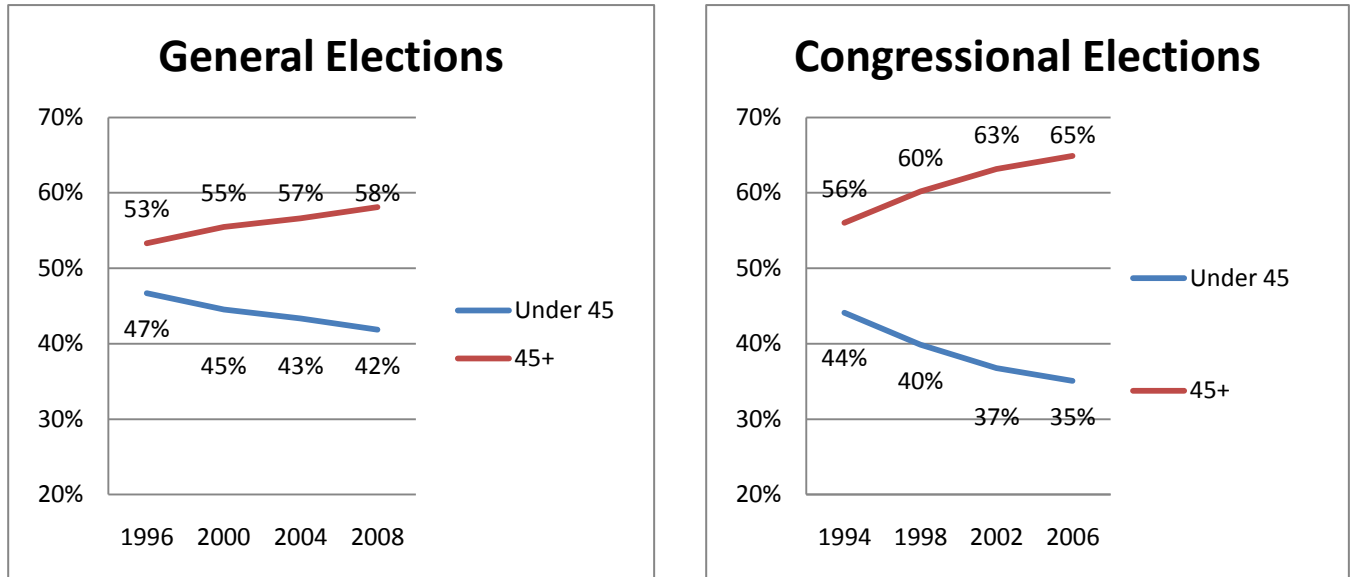
Figure 3. Voter Turnout by Age Group in Recent Congressional Electionsⁱⁱ



In Congressional Elections, the propensity to vote increases with each successive age cohort. No greater than 20% of those age 18 to 24 voted in prior Congressional Elections; for those 65 and older, no fewer than 60% voted in Congressional Elections (shown in Figure 3). This pattern leads to the 45+ cohort being overrepresented to greater degrees in Congressional Elections than in General Elections.

A final consideration of older voters' political involvement has to do with the combination of the size of the older voter cohort and their greater relative tendency to vote in both General Elections and Congressional Elections. Figure 4 presents the share of those voting in the last 8 federal-level elections that were 45+ and the share that was younger than age 45.

Figure 4. Percentage of the Voting Electorate younger than age 45 and those 45 or older in General and Congressional Elections



The overrepresentation of older voters in General and Congressional Elections has increased consistently over time. For Congressional Elections, those age 45 and older represented 56% of those voting in 1994. By 2006, older voters represented 65% of those voting. In this time period, the relative shares of those voting in Congressional Elections has increased from a +12% margin for older voters to a +30% margin for 45+ voters.

Implications

Since at least 1994, American citizens age 45 or older have increased their share of the voting electorate. This trend has been relatively more pronounced for Congressional Elections than for General Elections. If current voter turnout trends continue, more than two-thirds of voters in the 2010 Congressional election will be 45 or older.

ⁱ Figures 1 and 2 use U.S. Census Bureau figures and secondary calculations using Table 406. of the Current Population Reports, P20-423, P20-442, P20-552, P20-556, P20-557 and earlier reports; "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008" The population of 18+ *Citizens* rather than the general 18+ population was used as the relevant basis for describing the American electorate. Consequently, turnout figures may not match figures from other sources that view the "general 18+ population" (citizen and non-citizen) as the population in question.

ⁱⁱ Figures 3 and 4 use U.S. Census Bureau figures and secondary calculations using Current Population Surveys from November 2008 and earlier.