



## Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Democracy Corps

*Report on the Obama Generation*

# Republicans “on the Precipice of Becoming Irrelevant:” Obama and Republicans Square off Among Younger People

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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

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### **Report on the Obama Generation**

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In a recent interview with Rachel Maddow, John McCain’s daughter Meghan McCain warned her party that it was, “on the precipice of becoming irrelevant to young people.” This conclusion comes in the wake of a 66 to 32 percent drubbing by young people in the 2008 elections. Our survey of young people taken three months after the election underscores the alienation of Republicans from the millennial generational. By a 59 to 14 percent margin, young people prefer the Democrats when it comes to “paying attention to issues that affect younger people,” a six point gain since 2007.

Republicans struggle among young people for a very specific reason. At a time when young people are paying close attention to politics and when so many are struggling economically, even more so than older generations, the Republicans simply do not speak to the reality of their lives or to the issues important to them. This perception stands in marked contrast to their reaction to Barack Obama. Nationally, voters’ opinion of the President may have cooled slightly—and inevitably—in recent weeks, but among younger voters, he has never been more popular. They strongly support his economic policy and are confident that he will make a difference in their lives.

Still, progressives have real challenges among young people as well. While young people broadly support Barack Obama, not all of this energy and enthusiasm transfers to Democrats running in 2010. For instance, young people betray symptoms of dropping out of the electorate in the 2010 elections. Only 46 percent of the electorate that gave Barack Obama 66 percent of the vote share five months ago strongly commit to turning out in 2010. In coming months, Democracy Corps will launch several studies looking at the problem of 2010 drop-off voters and younger people will figure largely in this conversation.





## How to Survey Young People

This population is exceptionally difficult to reach through traditional polling methods. More important, traditional polling methods are no longer a reliable way of understanding America's young people. Up to 70 percent are impossible to interview using a landline phone, either because they do not have a landline phone or do not use a landline phone as their main service for in-coming calls.

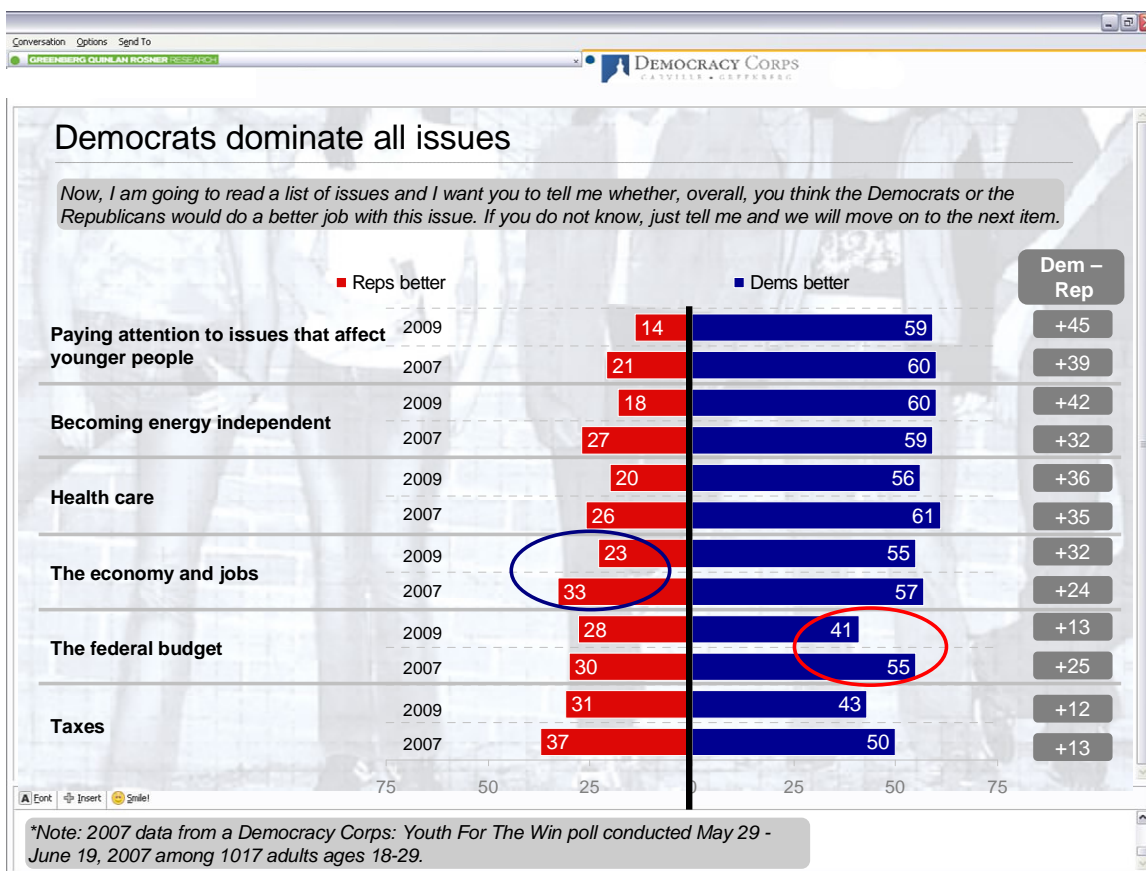
This means that most will not be reached with a traditional land-line phone survey. Therefore, this project involves a multi-modal approach using web-based interviewing, cell phone interviewing, as well as a land-line sample. Moreover, as turn out represents such a critical variable in the political disposition of young people, this project does not screen for likely voters.

Between February 25 and March 11, 2009, Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research interviewed 606 young people, ages 18-29. This project does not exclude non-voters or unlikely voters in order to look at the wider population of young people. It used a multi-mode design including 180 cell phone interviews, 306 web based interviews and 120 interviews using a random digit dial sample conducted over the telephone.

## **Republicans on the Brink**

In young people's eyes, the Republican Party has little to offer them. Favorability ratings for the Republicans have improved slightly as election passions cooled, but a shockingly small number of young people describe the Republicans as "tolerant," "on their side," "representing change" or "having real plans for the country." Young people give the Democrats a 32-point advantage on their most important issue, "the economy" (up 8 points from 2007) and a 45-point advantage on "paying attention to issues that affect young people" (up 6 points from 2007).

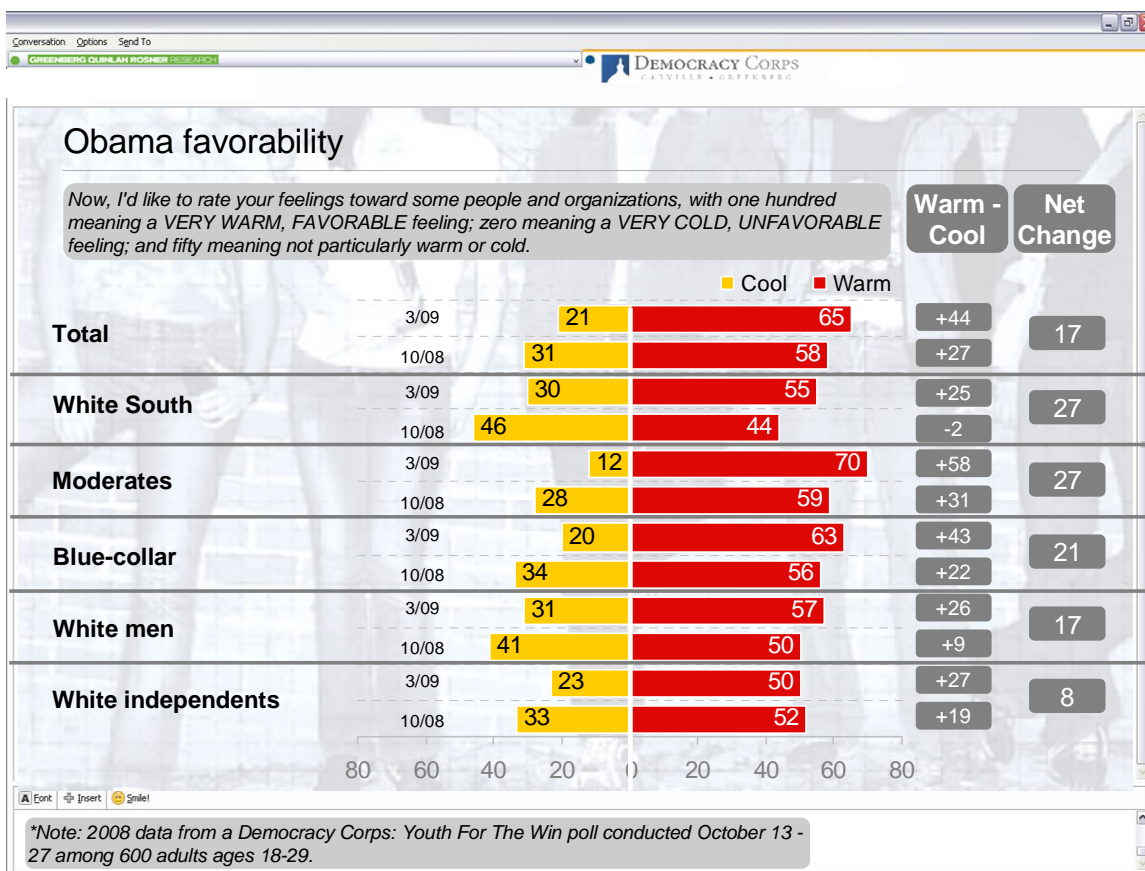
What seems to be driving young people further away from the Republican Party since the election is not Republican obstruction in Congress or even the kind of extremism that provoked Meghan McCain to take on Ann Coulter. Rather, it is failure to speak to their lives in a fashion that is meaningful to them.



### Focus on Obama

Young people are paying attention to Washington. Nearly half (45 percent) of young people watched the President’s prime time address on February 24th and 75 percent describe themselves as following the Obama administration closely. Even among young people who are not registered to vote, a 60 percent majority say they have watched the Administration carefully.

What they have seen is a President addressing their primary issue concern boldly and who seems to speak to the reality of their lives. As a result, their support for this President improved markedly since the election. Obama’s favorability stands at 65 percent positive and 21 percent negative, up from 58 percent positive, 31 percent negative in October, 2008. His job approval scores stand at a monumental 74 percent approval, with just 17 percent disapproving. These advances take place throughout the entire generation, but particularly among those groups who proved more resistant through the campaign, such as “older” (age 24-29) white men, whites in the South, white blue collar, as well as white independents. Among liberal-moderate Republicans, 67 percent approve of the job performance of this Democratic president so far.



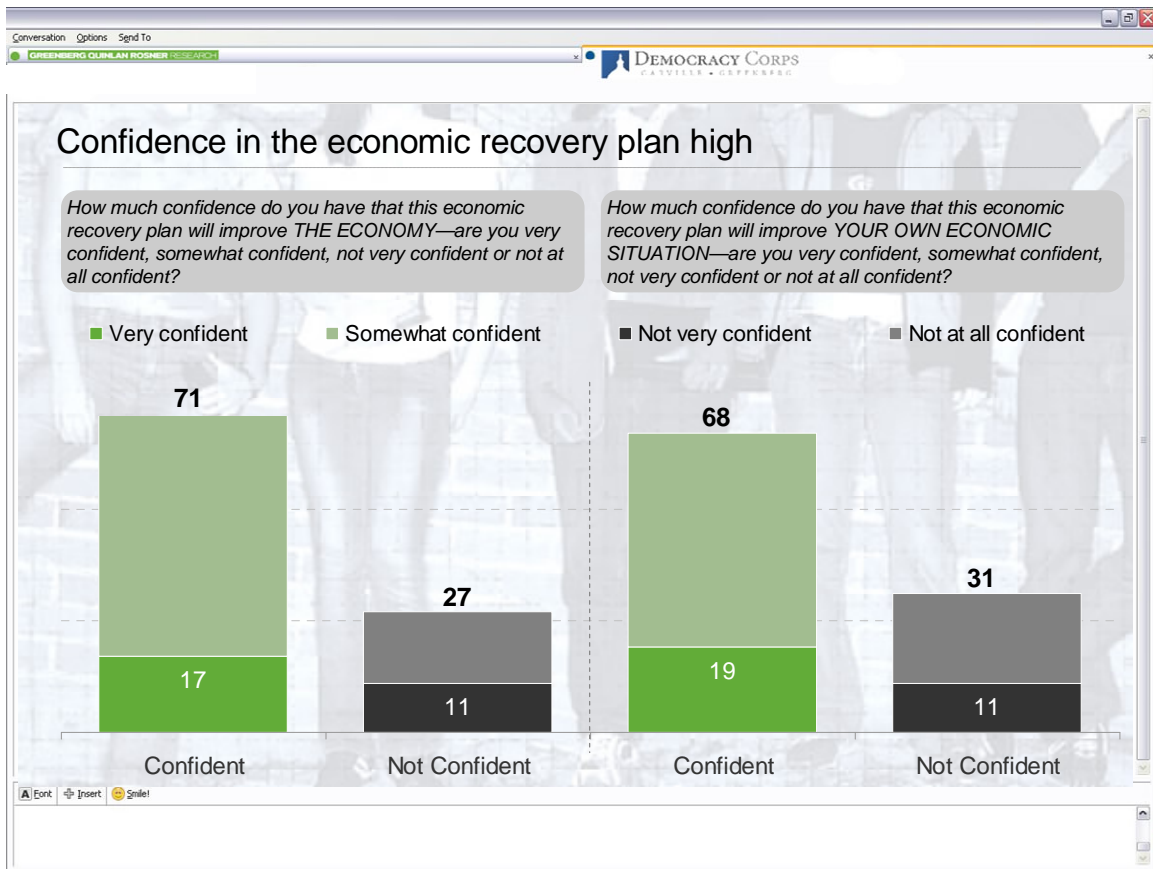
Young people support the stimulus package convincingly (68 percent favor, 20 percent oppose) and in much higher numbers than older Americans.<sup>1</sup> Young people doing well financially are only marginally less likely to support the plan (65 percent favor) than young people overall and even among Republicans, only 47 percent oppose.

Young people believe the stimulus plan will work, not only in improving the economy overall, but also in improving their own lives in particular. A 71 percent majority describe themselves as confident the stimulus plan will work overall, 68 percent are confident it will improve their own situation, including 68 percent of those who describe their personal economic situation as just fair or poor. At the same time, this confidence is somewhat measured and realistic – just 19 percent describe themselves as “very confident” the stimulus plan will work for them.

<sup>1</sup> In a recent national survey of likely voters for National Public Radio conducted jointly by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and the Republican polling firm Public Opinion Strategies, 55 percent supported the stimulus program, 42 percent opposed.



The deficit is a significant issue among young people, one that could grow over time, but for now young people believe economic recovery over the long term is more dependent on making investments than controlling the deficit.



When asked what particularly about the stimulus plan has the most promise for their own lives, the interest this cohort always shows in college affordability makes itself plain (42 percent). But the second leading response is the \$400 tax break for individuals and \$800 tax break for families. At minimum, this may be the most tactile aspect of the stimulus program; moreover, \$400 is not an insignificant sum of money for those just entering the job market.

This overwhelming support for Obama’s economic plan reflects not just partisanship, but the economic reality of young people’s lives. As we have reported before, this economic crisis has hit young people particularly hard. A 61 percent majority of young people describe their own economic situation as “only fair” or “poor.” Less educated young people, not surprisingly, seem to be having a harder time of it and unmarried women (72 percent “only fair” or “poor”) are among the most economically marginalized groups in this cohort. As telling, nearly one in five



(19 percent) young people in this survey describe themselves as unemployed/looking for work, 31 percent among high school educated women.<sup>2</sup>

A 52 percent majority agree, “I am one pay check away from having to borrow money from my parents or credit cards,” just 38 percent say “I have enough savings to fall back on if something minor goes wrong with my finances.” The margin between the first statement and the second statement grew by 7 points in last four months.<sup>3</sup>

### **Potentially Serious Turnout Issues Could Face Democrats in 2010**

The stakes in 2010 could scarcely be higher. With redistricting looming, a majority (38) of the nation’s governors will be decided, including 18 open-seats. No less than 56 Democratic freshmen and sophomores will be defending their seats and of the 28 congressional elections identified to by Charlie Cook as competitive, 21 are held by Democrats. The immediate problem progressives’ face is that too few base groups commit to vote in the 2010 election. The problem is not any disappointment or let down with Obama, but the gap between enthusiasm for Obama and enthusiasm for Democrats. This also reflects, of course, the natural drop in voting we see in off-year elections, a trend that has been historically higher among young people.

Less than half (47 percent) of young people who voted in 2008 strongly commit to voting in 2010.<sup>4</sup> Among all youth, just 34 percent strongly commit to turning out next year. In contrast, among all 2008 voters, a 68 percent majority commit to voting.<sup>5</sup> The problem grows steadily worse among more Democratic oriented voters relative to more conservative younger voters. Among 2008 Obama voters, 46 percent commit to voting, compared to 54 percent among McCain voters. There are other examples as well.

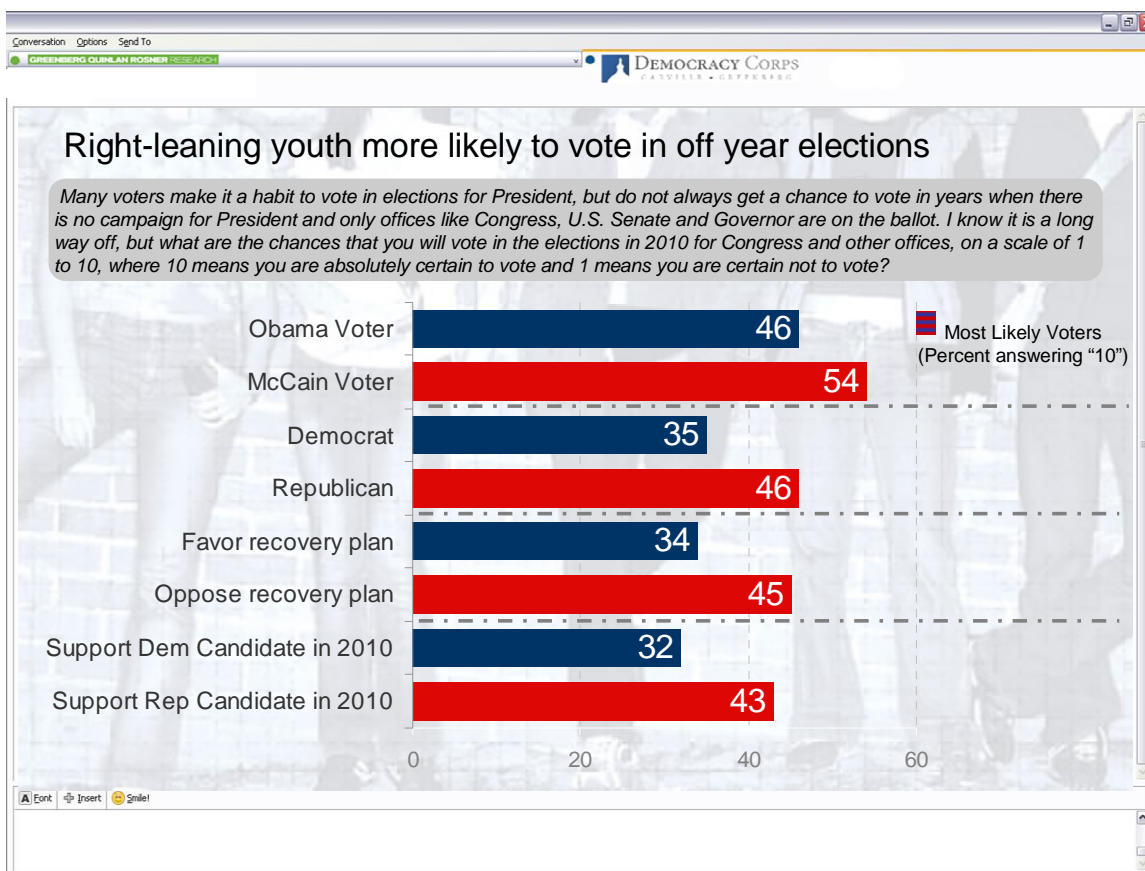
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<sup>2</sup> In much of our public opinion work, respondent self-reported unemployment status exceeds government figures, in part, because the government only counts those actively seeking employment.

<sup>3</sup> In an October 2008 Youth For The Win survey, 50 percent answered that they were one check away from having to borrow and 42 percent had enough savings come financial hardship.

<sup>4</sup> Answering “10” when asked to rank their likelihood of voting in 2010 on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 meaning absolutely certain to vote and 1 means certain not to vote.

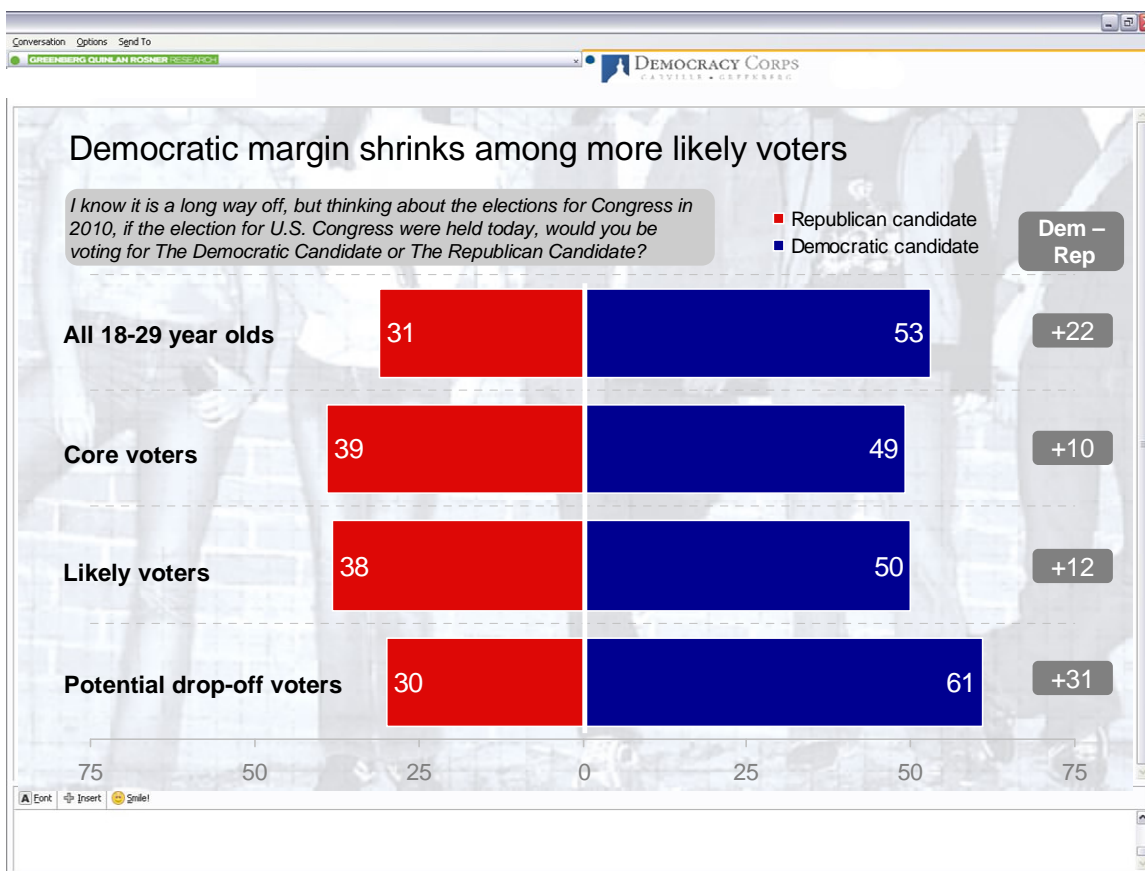
<sup>5</sup> Data reflect a Women’s Voices Women Vote survey of 1659 2008 voters taken January 22-February 3, 2009.



In a generic trial heat, “the Democratic Candidate” enjoys a 23-point margin over an unnamed Republican (53 to 31 percent). However, this Democratic margin closes to just 9 points among core voters<sup>6</sup> and 12 points among those most likely to vote. Among potential drop-off voters, Democrats enjoy a 31-point generic advantage.

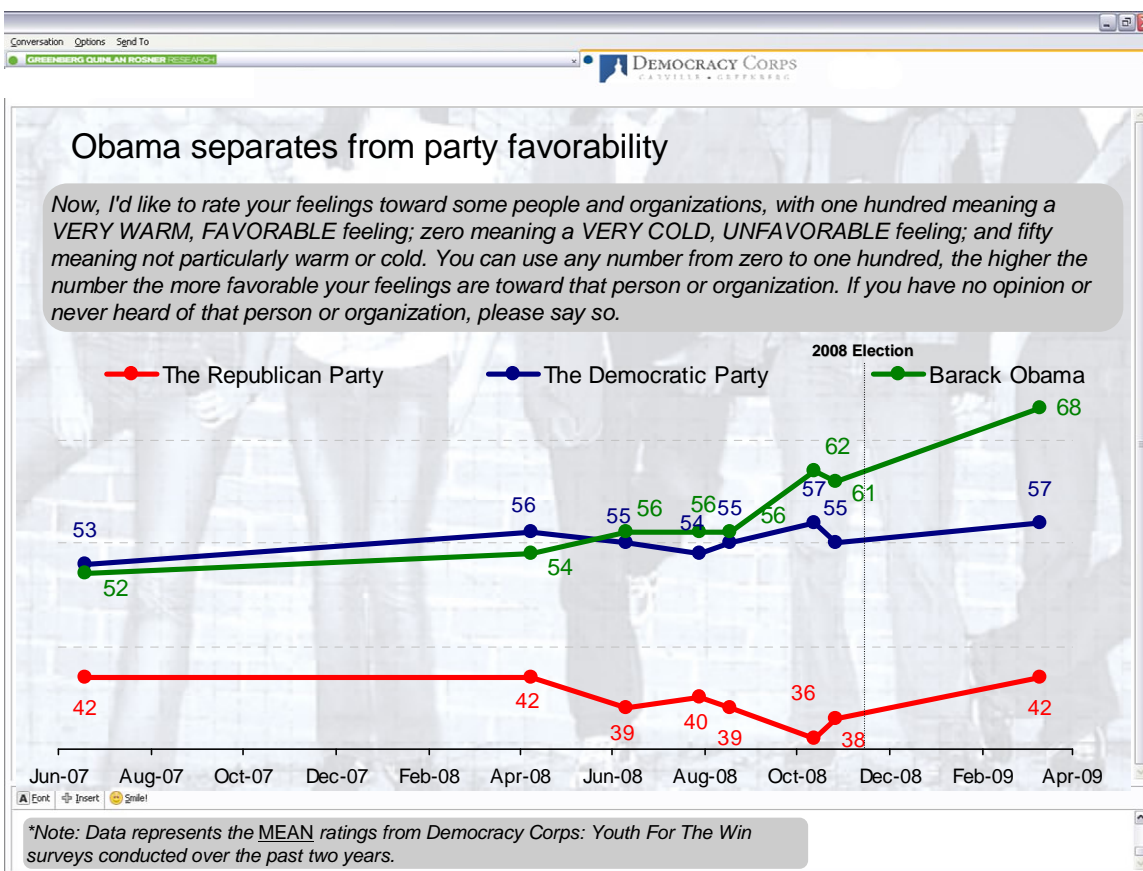
<sup>6</sup> Core voters are those who voted in 2008 and who say they are very likely to vote in 2010 (rate their chances a “10” on a ten-point scale); those most likely to vote also describe their likelihood to vote as a 10 point a 10-point scale, only they did not necessary vote in 2008.





There is no evidence, looking at drop-off voters, that their unconvincing commitment to voting in 2010 reflects disappointment with Obama; in fact, potential drop-off voters consistently show higher number for the President and his program than other voters.

In fact, it is the separation of Obama from his party that is cause for concern. In favorability scores, numbers rose slightly for Democrats since the election, but dramatically for Obama; Obama's mean favorability rating improved by 7 points, reflecting a 17-point gain in his positive-to-negative favorability ratings. His party only manages a 2-point improvement on the mean score and a 5-point improvement on its positive-to-negative rating.



## Conclusion

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan captured the youth vote and even today, Generation X voters are among the most conservative in the electorate. However, Democrats in the 1980's were much better positioned among young people than the Republicans are in this current period. With only 14 percent preferring the Republicans as the party that best pays attention to their issues, it is hard to describe this party as particularly relevant to young people.

The Republican road back is a long and hard one and it may be too late for this generation. It is not just the many short-comings young people see in this party—and they are legion—that haunts them, but the studied contrast between what they are offering today's youth and what young people see coming out of the Administration.

Of course, Obama is unlikely to sustain this level of enthusiasm for four years, even among young people, but the immediate problem progressives face for this generation is the separation we see between Obama and Democrats, a separation that carries a serious political consequence for 2010.