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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Women's Voices. Women Vote  
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## **Turnout and the New American Majority**

*A Year-Long Project Tracking Voter Participation and Vote Preference  
Among the Rising American Electorate: Executive Summary*

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As many in the voter participation communities have chronicled, declining turnout among some key groups in the American electorate represents a looming problem heading into the 2010 elections. Turnout collapsed among key segments of the Rising American Electorate (RAE)—unmarried women, people of color, and young people—in the 2009 elections in New Jersey and Virginia and the 2010 special in Massachusetts. Current evidence continues to predict similar problems among these key voting blocs in 2010. To be sure, turnout always drops during non-presidential years, but much of the polling in the summer and into the fall last year, as well as early polling in 2010, suggests a disproportionate problem among these specific voting blocs.<sup>1</sup>

This summary focuses on unmarried women, younger voters, African American voters, and Hispanic voters. Collectively, they represent a changing America. Between 1960 and 2006, the percentage of the voting-age population that was unmarried increased from 27 to 47 percent. A majority of American households are now headed by unmarried individuals.<sup>2</sup> Unmarried women now account for 25 percent of the adult population, a larger group than seniors and equal in size to their married counterparts. In 2008, young people (ages 18-29) numbered more than the baby boom generation. By 2040, a majority of Americans will likely be non-white.

While historically underrepresented in our democracy, these voters increased their participation in 2008. This RAE made up 47 percent of the 2008 electorate according to the Census Bureau, and they account for 52 percent of the voting-eligible population; unmarried women accounted for 48 percent of the increase in votes cast between 2004 and 2008, even though they represent less than 25 percent of the voting-eligible population. However, after key and historic gains in turnout, these voters are at a disproportionate risk of dropping off in 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1960, average turnout for a non-presidential year is 40 percent, compared to 55.2 percent for a presidential year (data drawn from Federal Election Commission).

<sup>2</sup> US Census data, 1960-2000, American Community Survey, 2006.



Progressives face another problem when it comes to these voters: *decreasing margins*. In 2008, the Rising American Electorate delivered better than two-thirds of their vote to Barack Obama and Democratic candidates. These margins declined dramatically in 2009 and the 2010 special election in Massachusetts. In Virginia, Democrat Creigh Deeds only managed 50 percent of the vote among unmarried women. Republican Scott Brown in Massachusetts carried voters under 40. Though not as dramatic, in this survey, we see lower margins across the RAE for Democratic congressional candidates.

This research begins a year-long effort to track the engagement of these voters, to explore reasons why these voters may have lower participation rates in the 2010 election, and to explore how RAE participation can be enhanced. It also looks at message framing for both parties and explores how each party's approach to the election might impact participation.

Some of the findings here are surprising and, in fact, counterintuitive. While economically stressed, RAE voters are optimistic about the near-term future of the economy. While mixed on the direction of the country, these voters indicate far more confidence than other voters. To be sure, these voters register their disappointment over the employment situation in the country and the visibility of the sausage-making process in health care reform, but on balance, voters in the Rising American Electorate still believe in change and remain hopeful. ***This is particularly true among RAE voters least likely to vote.***

Regression analysis suggests that the economy only plays a marginal role, at best, in lower levels of engagement and participation among these voters. Much of what drives their lower engagement is not a reaction to Washington or the economy, but a number of factors—higher likelihood of having moved since the last election, lack of confidence in casting an “informed” ballot, etc.—that traditionally undermine turnout and participation. Historically, 50 percent of younger people drop out of off-year elections; the rate is 35 percent among unmarried women.

This matters because it suggests that a disproportionate drop in turnout is not inevitable and not tethered to the economy. There are methods in place that have been tested over the years that have proven tremendously effective in increasing participation rates among historically underrepresented voters. The right program and the right message can improve their participation in 2010.

However, the economy likely plays a bigger role in these voters' shift in vote preference. Only 60 percent of RAE voters believe Obama and the Democrats are more concerned with creating jobs for ordinary Americans, while 31 percent believe they are more concerned with bailing out Wall Street. This is not a bad number, especially compared to other voting blocs; just 35 percent of Independents believe Democrats are more focused on creating jobs. But it is also a notable decline in light of the margins these voters delivered last November. Fully 70 percent of unmarried women supported Barack Obama in 2008, and 69 percent supported Democratic congressional candidates. Younger voters (65 percent for Obama) were marginally more competitive.

The summary reflects data from an oversample of a Democracy Corps survey taken between January 7 and 12, 2010, and represents an ongoing effort to track the level of engagement among these voters. It includes a total universe of 1,481 2008 voters and a total of 843 voters



from the Rising American Electorate.<sup>3</sup> The margin of error is +/-2.5 for the total sample and +/-3.4 for the Rising American Electorate. The youth oversample in this survey was conducted exclusively using cell phones.

## Main Findings

- ***Support has dropped, but these voters still believe in change... and Obama.*** The RAE remains supportive of the President. Unlike some other voters in the electorate, they support the President's economic and health care agendas. There is little evidence to suggest that turnout issues among RAE voters reflect broad disappointment in the Obama administration. However, because these are the voters who constitute the progressive infrastructure in this country, Democrats can ill afford any hesitation among the RAE. A combination of reduced margin and reduced turnout could produce dramatically different political outcomes in 2010.
- ***The RAE is more likely to drop out of the 2010 electorate.*** Asked to describe their enthusiasm for voting in the 2010 elections, only half (52 percent) rate their enthusiasm an 8 or higher on a 10-point scale, compared to 64 percent among non-RAE voters. In another measure, only 63 percent of the RAE describe themselves as almost certain to vote, compared to 80 percent among non-RAE voters.
- ***Importantly, the stated reasons some of the Rising American Electorate are less enthusiastic is not primarily related to "disappointment" with the political class.*** In fact, the leading reason is "don't know enough/not educated on issues." This is a fixable problem, and one that suggests the current low level of engagement among many voters in the RAE reflects more on historic voting obstacles than a specific reaction to current events.
- ***The RAE still favors Democrats, but at lower numbers.*** In a named trial heat for Congress, RAE voters break 2:1 for Democrats (60 – 31 percent), compared to a 54 – 36 percent Republican preference among non-RAE voters. Compared to 2008 levels, this reflects a notable change in support, particularly among younger voters. Support for congressional Democrats among unmarried women has dropped 9 points since 2008.
- ***The economy does not make it impossible to turn out these voters.*** One irony of this research is that the voters who have suffered the most in this recession are the most optimistic about America's ability to pull out of it. On almost every measure of personal economic standing—job status, income, use of federal and state aid, having health insurance, and so forth—the RAE is in worse shape in relation to other voters. However, when it comes to predicting the near-time economic future of the country, the RAE is significantly more optimistic. This reflects a politically progressive voting bloc's confidence in a Democratic administration, but it belies assumptions that current economic conditions will make it impossible to produce greater participation in 2010 among certain voting blocs.

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<sup>3</sup> Includes 507 unmarried women, 303 youth, 115 Hispanics, and 134 African Americans.



- ***Both parties need to get the economic narrative right and capture the mood of these voters.*** RAE voters believe in change, but they also believe in change they can see and that has meaning to their everyday lives. A framing that contrasts Democrats' efforts to help ordinary Americans and Republican efforts to block those efforts helps produced one of the most powerful contrasts for these voters, and holds the possibility re-engaging this electorate. Republicans also might do well to stoke the anger of Independents, but at the potential cost of losing what ability they have to compete among this voting block of nearly half the American electorate. These voters, at least, have not surrendered entirely their hope for change.