Does Age Bloc Voting Matter? An Examination of Older Voters Influence on the Recent Presidential Elections

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Abstract

In the 2008 presidential election, the majority of older persons failed to vote for the winner, which was only the second time in the past ten presidential elections. This trend continued in 2012, but not in the 2016 election. In Robert Binstock's studies of the 2008 presidential election and the 2010 midterm election, he examined age-group voting behaviors and possible electoral factors that might influence an individual's vote. He concluded that although age may have an effect on voting behavior, race was a much stronger predictor of voting choices and that regional data suggest a racial period effect among older White voters in the South.

This article is an extension of Binstock's past studies. It begins with a discussion regarding partisan leanings as a possible factor for why the older voters had a preference for the Republican candidates. The next section presents the views regarding health care issues by the different age-groups and whether there is evidence for age bloc voting in support of old-age retirement programs in the 2012 and 2016 elections. We then compare the results from the elections, focusing on age-groups and race/ethnicity. Finally we discuss the findings of voting behaviors by region. The findings are comparable to Binstock's studies and illustrates that race/ethnicity and region tend to be stronger predictors of voting choices than age-groups.

Key Words: Age bloc voting, Voting behavior, Elections, Politics of aging, Political exceptionalism

The baby boom generation began turning 65 in January 2011, and since then around 10,000 people a day enter the 65+ age-group (Pruchno, 2012; Stone and Barbarotta, 2011). For the first time in history, more than half of the United States voting age population is over 45 years old. Because of this, it is undoubtedly a good time to analyze the voting behaviors of the rapidly aging population to see if age is an important factor.

Campbell (2003) has observed that, although older adults are not uniquely supportive of retirement benefits, such as Social Security, they are distinctive when it comes to participatory behavior in response to any perceived threat to these benefits. Campbell (2003) provides evidence of older voter distinctiveness in behavior when Social Security was threatened with cuts in the 1980's, in which they came forcefully to its defense. Rhodebeck (1993) also found some evidence of distinctive voting behavior among older adults – that they are more likely than younger adults to take retirement benefits into account in their congressional and presidential vote decisions.

Binstock (2011) suggests that historically the idea of old-age bloc voting is largely inaccurate. However, similar to Campbell and Rhodebeck, he found that when there were alleged threats to other essential old-age benefits, the Medicare program, older voters would respond in a distinctively defensive manner (Binstock, 2011). In the absence, however, of a perceived threat to old age benefits, the fact that the baby boomer generation is a very large and heterogeneous group with differing political views, makes it difficult to predict the voting behaviors and influence of this group.

This article begins with a discussion regarding partisan leanings as a possible factor for why the older voters had a preference for the Republican candidates. The next section presents the views regarding health care issues by the different age-groups and whether there is evidence

for age bloc voting in support of old-age retirement programs for the 2012 and 2016 elections. We then compare the results from the elections, focusing on age-groups and race/ethnicity. Finally we discuss the findings of voting behaviors by region.

Data & Methods

Edison Research is the exclusive provider of the National Election Exit Polls to the major US television news networks and the Associated Press. It was formed in 2003 in order to provide information on election night about the vote count, election analysis, and election projections. The voter surveys provide political, demographic, and geographic information detailing voters and whom they chose for President, Senator, and Governor, as well as the results for newsworthy state ballot issues.

Data for this analysis was acquired from the 2012 and 2016 National Election Day Exit Poll, conducted by Edison Research, and from other media publications. Data from both elections were aggregated by Edison Research and presented in crosstab format. Specifically, the data included the percent of who voted for the Republican and Democrat candidates broken down by age-groups (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60-64, 65+), four regions (East, Midwest, South and West), and Race/Ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic). Data was also gathered on specific questions from the Exit Poll that addressed healthcare issues. Overall, the data from each election (2008-2016) were compared to each other to show voting trends among age-groups.

Votes for U.S. President by Age-Groups: Partisan Leanings

Binstock (2009) suggests that the partisan leanings of people in their late 60s during the 2008 election were "definitely a factor in explaining the preference of a majority of current older voters for Republican presidential candidates" (p. 698). He explains that the political

socialization of this cohort occurred during the eight years of Eisenhower's presidency – the first Republican president in 20 years – and therefore, was more attracted to the Republican Party.

The oldest of the baby boomers, however, came of age during the Kennedy/Johnson era and tend to vote in favor of the Democrats. For instance, the oldest boomers came of age during a period of tumultuous social change, including the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, the sexual and drug revolutions, and the feminist and gay movements (Pruchno, 2012). The youngest boomers, on the other hand, reached the age of majority during the more conservative Reagan years. These younger boomers could have more conservative views than the older boomers, leading to a stronger affinity for Republican candidates.

Support for the Republican presidential candidate among older voters was evident in the 2004 election, which was a notable change from the 2000 election where the majority of the 60 and over age-group voted for the Democrat, Al Gore. Binstock examined the data from the 2008 national Election Day exit poll and found that voters aged 60 years and older cast 51 percent of their vote for McCain and 47 percent for Obama (Binstock, 2009). He raised voters' partisan leanings as one of the possible explanations for why McCain received distinctive majorities from older voter cohorts.

In the 2012 presidential election, Obama defeated Romney by a margin of 51% -48% among all voters (NBC News, 2012). However, 50 percent of the people age 60-64 and 56 percent of those aged 65 and over voted for Romney (Exit poll, 2012). The older voters were not the only ones to give a majority vote to Romney, as voters' ages 45-59 gave the Republican 52 percent of their votes. The younger age-groups, however, favored Obama with 52 percent of the votes from the 30-44 age-group and 60 percent from the 18-29 age-group. It is unlikely, however, that the boomers had much of an effect on the percent of votes for those 65 and older in

the 2012 election because they were just beginning to enter this age-group. Although the boomers were part of a larger share of the older voting group in the 2012 election, they were in all likelihood, substantially outnumbered by older voters, who supported Romney.

If Binstock's (2009) argument of partisan leanings is accurate, then the results of the 2016 election would show a decrease in the majority vote for the Republicans as more boomers enter the 65+ age-group, which is precisely what happened. In the 2016 election, 52 percent of the 65+ age-group voted for Trump. This is a 4 percent decrease from the 2012 election when 56 percent voted for the Republican candidate. The voters aged 60-64 were tied at 48 percent for both candidates. The 45-59 age-group continued to favor the republican candidate (53%). The younger age-groups supported the democratic candidate, Clinton (51% of the 30-44 age-group and 55% of the 18-29 age-group. This pattern is consistent with the voting patterns in the 2012 election. Figure 1 shows the percent voting for Republican candidates, by age-groups, for the 2012 and 2016 elections (for a graph of the previous 10 presidential elections see Figure 3 in Binstock 2011). Overall, the trend since the 2004 election is for the 65+ age-group to favor the Republican presidential candidate.

Age-Groups and Views about Health Care

In the concluding remarks from Binsock's (2009) study of the 2008 election, he mentions that some (e.g., Thurow, 1996) have argued that the boomers would become more politically cohesive in support of old-age retirement programs. In his analysis of the 2010 elections, Binstock suggests there is little reason to expect such a diverse birth cohort to suddenly become homogeneous in self-interests and political behaviors, even with respect to old-age benefits; several other interests may be more important to older voters. To test this hypothesis he examined whether alleged threats to the Medicare program had an effect on older age-group

voting patterns (Binstock, 2011). He found that for the first time in four decades, there was evidence of some bloc voting among older voters.

In the 2010 midterm elections, when Republican candidates tried to link possible threats to the Medicare program to Democratic policy initiatives, mainly the Affordable Care Act, 59 percent of the 65 and older age-group voted for Republican candidates (Binstock, 2011). The one question from the Election Day exit poll that had some relevance to the Medicare threat issue was, "What should Congress do with the new health care law? Expand it? Leave it as it is? Repeal it?" (Binstock, 2011, p. 412). The 65 and older age-group were most (55%) in favor of repealing the law.

The same question was on the 2012 exit poll. The data shows that 51 percent of voters aged 65 and older were in favor of repealing the health care law. This is 4 percent less than the 55 percent of votes from the same age-group in the 2010 midterm congressional election who supported repealing the law. In addition, in the 2012 election voters aged 45-59 were the age-group most in favor of repeal (56%), which is different from the 2010 midterm congressional election where the 65 and over age-group had the highest percent supporting repeal.

In line with Binstock's (2009) suggestion to focus on partisan leanings, these findings reflect differences in views by cohort. Voters in the 65 and older age group and the younger boomers (45-59 age-group) both supported repeal of the health care law. As mentioned earlier, these two groups reached the age of majority during periods when Republicans controlled the White House. On the other hand, the 60-64 age-group, which consists of the older boomers, supported expanding the health care law. This group reached majority under a Democratic president.

Another health care question in the 2012 exit poll data asked, "Who would better handle Medicare? Obama or Romney?" The data reveals a pattern similar to the results from the health care law question. The majority (52%) of the 65 and older age-group believed that Romney would handle Medicare better, compared to only 44 percent of the 60-64 age-group. Likewise, there was a slightly higher percent of people in the 45-59 age-group who felt that Romney would handle Medicare better; however, it was only a one percent difference. The response regarding Medicare from the 45-59 age-group is not a strong indicator that cohort effects are a factor. Yet, taken together with the data on the other health care questions, the argument becomes a bit more robust.

An additional question from the 2010 midterm and 2012 election asked, "Which one of these four issues is the most important issue facing the country? Foreign Policy? Federal Budget Deficit? The economy? Health Care?" Although health care was rated second in both elections, this issue was not addressed in the 2016 poll questions. The four issues mentioned were, foreign policy, immigration, economy, and terrorism. The economy was the top issue for all age groups (52%), followed by terrorism (18%), foreign policy (13%), and immigration (12%).

The one question related to health care in the 2016 poll asked, "Do you think the 2010 federal health care law, also known as Obamacare, did not go far enough, went about right, or went too far?" The percentages for all age-groups were highest in the response "went too far" (47% aged 65 and older, 49% aged 60-64, 51% aged 45-59, 48% aged 30-44, and 37% aged 18-29) (Figure 2).

Overall, Binstock suggests that age is not the strongest predictor of the voting behaviors; however, the 65 and older age-group from the 2010 midterm congressional election were "affected by their perception that President Obama's health care reform legislation would have

negative consequences for health care paid for through the Medicare program" (Binstock, 2011, p. 415). Therefore, the older voters had the chance influence the outcome of the 2012 and 2016 elections to a greater extent than they have historically. When compared to the 2010 midterm election, the data from the 2012 election does not support strong evidence for age bloc voting regarding health care issues, such as Medicare and the Affordable Care Act,. It was even less apparent in the 2016 election because concerns for health care were not part of the top four important issues facing the country, nor was there much discourse in general about threats to retirement benefits during the debates leading up to the election. Therefore, without the threat to retirement programs, age block voting is likely not as important when compared to other variables, such as race/ethnicity and region.

Votes for U.S. President by Age-Groups and Race/Ethnicity

Binstock (2009) also examined race in the 2008 and 2010 elections. Due to the birth cohort and period effects from an era when overt racial discrimination was stronger than in succeeding eras, it was expected that "the contrasting racial identities of the two candidates might influence the voters" (p. 700). Although 80 percent of voters in the 2008 exit poll stated that race was not a factor in their choice, when looking at the breakdown of votes by age and race, McCain received the majority of the White votes, as had Republican candidates in most presidential elections since 1976. However, based on the data from the 2008 election, Binstock could not conclude that race was an important factor in older persons' voting choices. He did briefly mention that there might be a racial period effect when looking at regional figures.

In his study of the 2010 midterm congressional election, Binstock (2011) found that only examining the voters by age-groups, "hides even greater variations in the voting patterns of racial and ethnic groups" (p. 414). Similar to the 2008 election, there were substantial differences

between the White, Hispanic, and Black votes in the 2010 midterm election. The majority of Whites voted for Republican congressional candidates, while most of the Blacks and Hispanics voted for Democrats.

When examining the voting patterns of racial and ethnic groups in the 2012 election, the findings are comparable to the previous elections, as substantial differences appear among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. In the 2008 election, McCain received the majority (55%) of the White votes, compared to only 31 percent from Hispanic and 4 percent from Blacks (Binstock 2009). In the 2012 election, Romney received an even greater majority (59%) of the White votes, compared to just 27 percent from Hispanics and 6 percent from Blacks.

The voting patterns of racial/ethnic groups in the 2016 election continued with the same trends of the previous elections, with large differences between White and minority votes. Trump received the majority of the White votes (57%), compared to only 8 percent from Blacks, and 28 percent from Hispanics (Figure 3).

Broken down by race and age-groups, the results show that there is not much change between the 2008 and 2012 elections, except with the 18-29 age-group. In the 2008 election, the majority (54%) of the White 18-29 age-group favored Obama (Binstock 2009). However, in the 2012 election this same age-group favored Romney with 51 percent of their votes. There was a slight increase in the Whites and Blacks support for Romney in all age-groups (apart from the Blacks age 65+, which stayed the same). For the Hispanics, the oldest and the youngest age-groups had a small increase in their support for the republican candidate in the 2012 election, and the two middle aged groups decreased their support.

In the 2016 election, the results show that there is not much change from the past two elections, with the exception of the Hispanics in the 65+ age-group. The older Hispanics

decreased their support for the republican candidate from 35 percent in 2012 to 25 percent, and increased their support for the democrats from 65 percent to 73 percent (Figure 4).

Overall, race, rather than age, is a much stronger predictor of voting choices. As Binstock (2009) pointed out, "regional figures suggest the possibility of a racial period effect among older White voters in the South" (p. 700). The final section of this report discusses the findings of voting behaviors by region from the 2012 and 2016 elections.

Age-Groups and Race/Ethnicity by Region

The political history of the White South has been the focus of much debate over the past several decades. There are a variety of perspectives discussed in the literature regarding the partisan realignment in this region, which changed from being mostly Democratic in the pre-civil rights period, to being a majority Republican region over the last several years. To what extent does this shift since the 1960s make the south as politically exceptional compared to the rest of the country as it has been historically?

Southern exceptionalism has been defined as a unique social environment that is the "result of some underlying cultural framework, nurtured by the geographic setting, history, and socioeconomic relations" (Aistrup, 2010, p. 909), which generates different patterns of behavior among southerners when compared to other regions. Some studies argue that the South is no longer unique (Aistrup, 2010; Shafer and Johnston, 2006), while other studies suggest that the political attitudes of the South remain distinctive (Hayes and McKee, 2008; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg, 2008; Osborne, Sears, and Valentino, 2010). In this section, we use the regional results from the 2012 and 2016 elections to interrogate the argument that the South continues to be politically exceptional.

Two general factors seem to cause political realignments; change among party elites, and shifting attitudes of the mass public (Valentino and Sears, 2005). In this case, the party elites changed their views on racial and other social issues. More specifically, "Democratic elites began to move to more liberal positions on noneconomic issues such as national defense or abortion in the 1970s, and the Reagan era heightened the distinctive economic conservatism of the Republican Party" (Valentino and Sears, 2005, p. 673).

In the early 1950s, the Democratic Party dominated over three-quarters of the Southern electorate; however, by 2002, it had declined to a meager twenty-six percent (Osborne et al., 2010). Osborne and colleagues (2010) suggest that political realignment occurred because, "White southerners have long been more conservative than Whites elsewhere in the nation, and they finally came to see that the Republican Party better represents their distinctive preferences...[and] partisanship has become aligned in a more consistent fashion with underlying ideological preferences" (p. 84-85).

Partisanship is substantially a function of socialization, specifically the transmission of party identification from parent to child (Hayes and McKee, 2008; Valentino and Sears, 2005). Over the last three decades, the number of southern White voters who identify with the Republican Party has increased dramatically and a generation of southern Republican parents is now transferring their support of the Republican Party to the next generation of voters. This generational exchange, along with the decline of older southern Democrats, has led to an increase in southern White Republicans.

Examples of this can be found in the 2012 election. The majority vote favored Romney in the South by 10 percent. In the Midwest, the vote was even at 49 percent for each candidate. In

the East and the West, Obama was favored by approximately 15 percent. The South was the only region with a majority vote for Romney.

When examining the voting patterns by region in the 2016 election, the results are very similar to the 2012 election. The South continued its majority vote for the republican candidate (53%). The Midwest increased its support for the republican candidate by 1 percent (50%). In the East and West, the democratic candidate continued to be favored by approximately 15 percent. The South maintains its high support for the Republican Party, with the Midwest slightly increasing its support for the party (Figure 5).

The results can be broken down further by age-groups and race for each region. In the 2008 election, all voters in the South who were aged 60 and older favored McCain at 62 percent, compared to 45 percent in the East, 46 percent in the Midwest, and 47 percent in the West (Binstock, 2009). In the 2012 election, Whites in the South were the only group overall to favor Romney (68% for those 18-29, 69% of the 30-44 year olds, 70% of the 45-64 age-group, and 72% of the 65+ age-group). In the other three regions, the White 18-29 year olds had a majority vote for Obama, and Whites in all of the other age-groups (except the 30-44 age-group in the West) favored Romney. The margins of difference in all of the age-groups in the three other regions was much smaller than in the South.

When examining the voting patterns in the 2016 election, the findings are comparable to the previous elections. Again, Whites in the South in all age-groups favored the Republican candidate, Trump, by large margins (55% for those 18-29, 65% of the 30-44 year olds, 74% of the 45-64 age-group, and 71% of the 65+ age-group). Whites in all the age-groups in the Midwest also favored Trump, but by a much smaller margin. This is, however, different from the 2012 election, where the 18-29 age-group had a majority vote for Obama (50%) versus only 42

percent for Clinton in 2016. This loss of support among younger voters for the Democratic candidate may have contributed substantially to Trumps win in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan (Figure 6A and 6B).

Based on the data from the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections, it appears that race/ethnicity and region, rather than age, were far more influential factors in shaping voting choices. Furthermore, the results from the 2012 and 2016 elections illustrate that the politics of the South continue to be exceptional as Whites voted overwhelmingly for Republican candidates, while the White vote in the rest of the country was split far more evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates in both elections.

Methodological Limitations

The authors acquired the data for this analysis directly from Edison Research and from other media publication websites. A major limitation to using this data is that it was aggregated by Edison Research and presented in crosstab format. With aggregated data, the researchers could not study the effects of variables at the individual subject level. Therefore, only limited results could be presented. In addition, without access to the individual data, multivariate analyses could not be included.

Discussion and Conclusion

Binstock's studies of previous elections focused on age-group voting behaviors and attempted to explain the electoral factors that are likely to influence an individual's vote. In his study of the 2008 presidential election, he found voters partisan leanings, the candidates' contrasting ages and racial identities, and how the voters viewed the candidates' judgment and experience to be explanations for why older voter cohorts favored the Republican candidate.

Binstock's article on the 2010 midterm congressional election examined whether alleged threats to the Medicare program had an effect on older age-group bloc voting (Binstock, 2011). Binstock found that for the first time in four decades, there was evidence of an emerging old-age voting bloc and suggested that the older voters could be the key to the outcome of the 2012 election. However, Binstock's (2011) findings also revealed notable differences in the age-group data by race/ethnicity. He anticipated that "the contrasting racial identities of the two candidates might influence the voters" (p. 700). Although Binstock could not conclude that race was a factor in older persons voting choices, he did suggest that there might be a racial period effect when looking at regional data.

Continuing with essentially the same analytical parameters as Binstock's past studies, we examined the findings from the 2012 and 2016 exit poll data. These data suggest that partisan leaning, the candidates' contrasting racial identities, and candidate characteristics are all factors that influence an individual's vote.

As suggested by Binstock, we looked at the election results by region and found that the South was the only region with a large majority vote for Romney and Trump, which strongly indicates that the South continues to be politically exceptional. Race/ethnicity and region tend to be greater predictors of voting choices than age-groups with White voters in the southern, and some western, states overwhelmingly supporting Republican candidates at every level. This does not mean, however, that these margins could not be reduced in favor of Democratic candidates in future elections.

The policy issue that may prove critical in reducing the Republican advantage among older voters in the future is retirement security and the likelihood that Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid will play an increasingly important role in supporting the economic well-being of

future retirees. The data reported here and elsewhere would seem to indicate that Republican candidates have benefitted most from any concerns older voters may have regarding the current and future status of these programs, especially the potential impact of health care reform initiatives on Medicare.

The Obama Administration made it more complicated for Democratic candidates in the 2014 and 2016 elections to take this tack as aggressively as many would like, by supporting the chained Consumer Price Index (CPI) for determining the size of the annual cost of living adjustments. Use of the chained CPI would reduce the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) increases by a modest, but significant amount over time compared to the regular CPI, which has been used to determine COLA increases since 1973. Developments, however, since the 2016 election may enhance the Democrats ability to exploit their historical advantage on Social Security and Medicare, and possibly Medicaid as well. The Republicans, however, are likely to retain their edge among these voters in the absence of a concerted Democratic effort to make retirement security central to their campaign strategy in future elections.

The Republicans may be at a long-term electoral disadvantage in the face of major demographic changes over the next 20 to 30 years, but their advantage in most elections since 2004 among older voters could play a major role in keeping them competitive in state and national elections for some time to come. Younger and minority voters are increasingly important electoral groups, but the older voter population is also growing with the aging of the boomer population and their high level of participation in elections is not likely to decrease in the future. This Republican advantage, however, may now be vulnerable following the proposed Republican health care reform legislation, which included big cuts to Medicaid, the principle funder of long term care in the country, the Trump budget proposal for 2017-2018 with its

recommendation to cut Medicaid further along with cuts to other social programs important to older people. The contest between the parties over retirement security and the future of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are increasingly set to become more salient electoral issues in the future than they have been for decades. These economic issues could lead to the emergence of older voters as an interest driven "bloc" that Binstock found to be mostly mythical in his research, and one that favors Democratic candidates.

These issues could be especially decisive in the Midwest where the split in the vote between the parties has become relatively even over the last several election cycles and where Trump was able to very narrowly win in three states that had voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 giving him his Electoral College margin of victory. The paper thin margins in Wisconsin and Michigan likely came from White voters without a college degree who voted for Obama previously and could potentially be enticed back to the Democratic Party ranks by a clear economic policy message that includes a strong commitment to retirement security based on unwavering support for, and possible enhancements of social security, Medicare, and Medicaid (Global Strategy Group and Yang, 2017).

Such a message would not necessarily be narrowly designed to appeal to white working class voters experiencing economic anxiety after decades of declining economic prospects. An economic message that includes retirement security enhancement proposals and a broader focus on initiatives to bolster the health, education, and housing prospects of the non-college degree population, would potentially appeal strongly to minority voters, most of whom are working class or precariously middle class (Levison, 2017). This kind of economic message may not be sufficient to overcome cultural factors, including racism and sexism, among working class voters and other whites, but it is probably the best and most constructive strategy for Democratic

candidates in future elections (Hudak, 2016). Older voters are likely to be increasingly open to economic messages as they approach retirement with declining retirement wealth resources and experience increasing concern for the life chances, including retirement security, of their own children (Munnell, Hou, and Webb, 2016).

Cultural factors will continue to be important in elections, especially in the South where voting is alarmingly polarized along racial lines. It also seems, however, that economic unease among working and middle class voters will likely increase in the future if chronically slow growth since the 2001 Recession, wage stagnation, increasing inequality, and growing education debt continue along their current course. In the absence of an economic message that is clearly responsive to these economic realities, more working and middle class voters could become supporters of President Trump and other right wing populist candidates (Hurst, 2017).

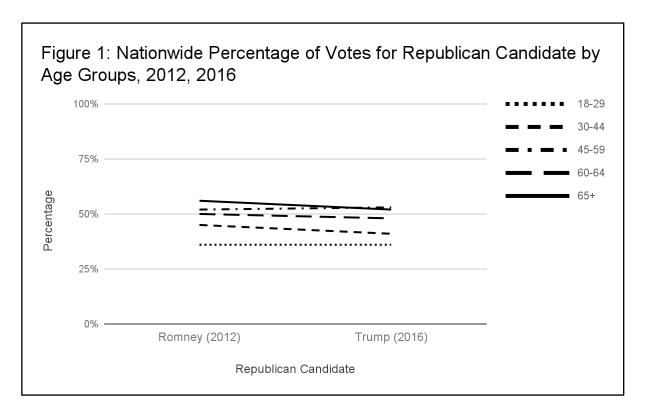
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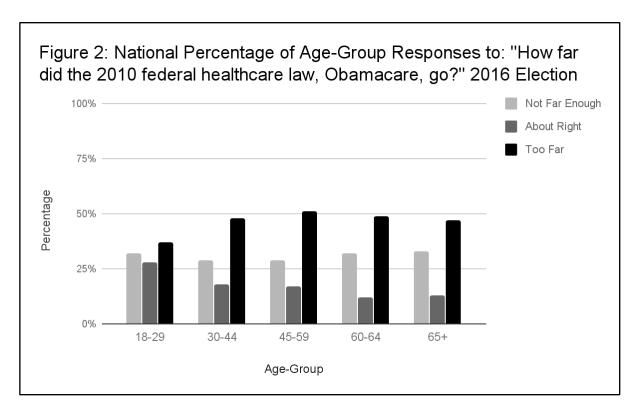
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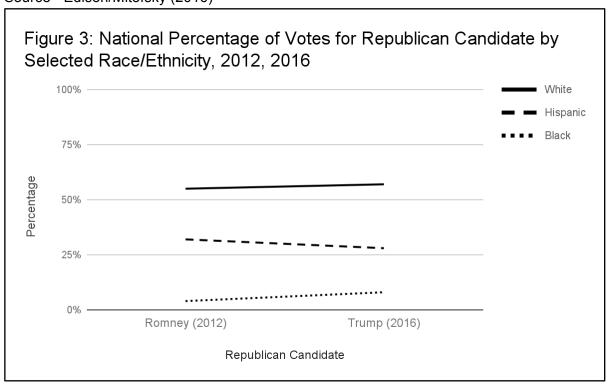
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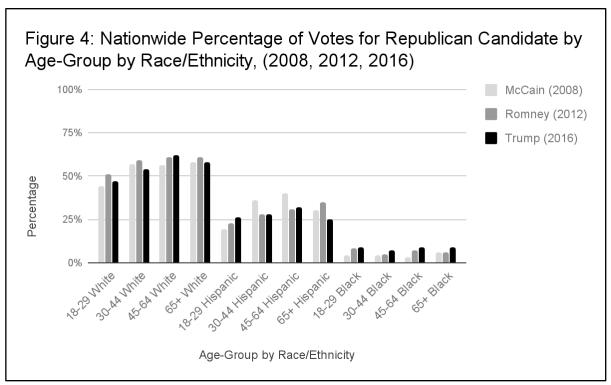
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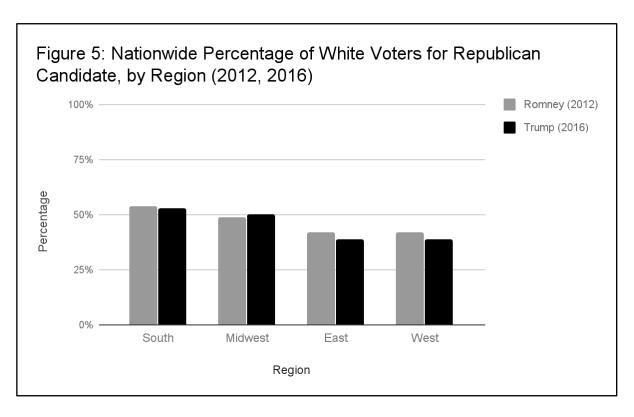
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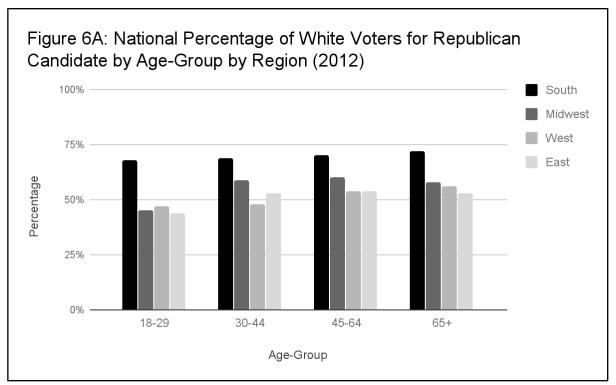
Source - Edison/Mitofsky (2012, 2016)



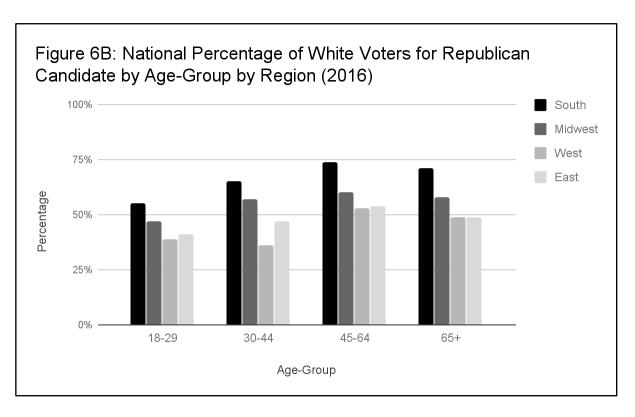
Source - Edison/Mitofsky (2012, 2016), Binstock (2009)



Source - Edison/Mitofsky (2012, 2016)



Source - Edison/Mitofsky (2012)



Source - Edison/Mitofsky (2016)