

# **Sincerity Trumps Strategy Explaining the Youth Vote in the 2016 Presidential Primary**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the voting behavior of young adults ages 18-24 in the 2016 presidential primary election. Young voters are often cited as a key demographic block that is almost always under-mobilized. Using a panel study conducted one week before and two days after the 2016 Illinois primary, this study examines factors that shape an individual's preferred candidate in the pre-primary survey and influence whether or not the individual turned out to vote in a primary election in the post-primary survey. The results suggest that an individual's ideology, most important issues, and desired candidate traits (e.g. honest, experienced, etc.) strongly shape candidate preference. The study finds that an individual's enthusiasm for their preferred candidate, the clarity of the candidate on the individual's most important issue, and the candidate's odds of winning the party nomination as perceived by the individual each shape the probability of an individual turning out to vote in the 2016 presidential primary.

## **Introduction**

One of the most potentially influential voting blocs of the American electorate is also one of the most under-mobilized. The youth vote is often championed as having the ability to sway election outcomes. However, individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 are among the least likely to turn out to vote. In 2012, 40 percent of eligible young voters turned out to vote. In contrast, nearly 72 percent of those over

the age of 65 voted on Election Day (File 2013). Moreover, one's probability of turning out to vote increases with age (Blais 2006).

However, it appears that the 2016 presidential race has been pivotal for young adults with Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders effectively mobilizing this historically under-mobilized demographic (Blake 2016; Green 2016). It is clear that young people are supporting both candidates through attending rallies, protesting, and voicing their opinions in seemingly record numbers. This is atypical of the 18-24 age voting bloc. Therefore, it is important to study the individuals within this bloc during the 2016 election cycle. What is so different about this election that brought this particular group of voters out of the woodwork to support Sanders or Trump? This study examines the candidate choice and voting behavior of young voters in the 2016 presidential primary. It explores the factors that lead young adults to select certain candidates over others and, more importantly, what determines whether an individual between the ages of 18-24 will vote in a primary.

The study looks at candidate choice and voting behavior by exploring how an individual's most desired candidate traits and most important issue influence the individual's preferred 2016 candidate. Furthermore, this study finds that factors such as an individual's enthusiasm for his or her preferred candidate, a preferred candidate's perceived clarity on an important issue, and the preferred candidate's perceived chance of winning impact the likelihood that someone will vote.

### **Theory of Candidate Preference**

During the presidential election season, one of the most common questions asked will be "Who are you supporting this election?" Individuals are inundated with mass emails, television advertisements, phone calls all throughout the day, and online posts by that uncle with whom everyone tries to avoid getting into lengthy conversations during the holidays. But just what exactly influences someone to support a candidate? Past literature has found that party identification,

the state of the economy or race has a direct influence on how voters choose a particular candidate (Bartels 2000; Markus 1988). This study focuses on candidate preference by looking at two understudied areas that strongly influence candidate choice: a voter's most important issue and ideal candidate traits.

We define the "most important issue" as the one policy or issue area that an individual believes is the most relevant or personally important at the moment. An individual's most important issue should give an idea of what that person is thinking about or considering when s/he heads to the polls on Election Day (Ladd and Lenz 2008). Moreover, we understand that when voters turn out with specific issues in mind, this benefits certain candidates at the expense of others (Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2008).

Similarly, a voter's ideal candidate traits are the core characteristics that the individual believes are most valuable or essential to a candidacy (Bishin, Stevens, and Wilson 2006). For example, some of the most common traits that Americans desire in their candidates include honesty, trustworthiness, and experience (Hayes 2010). The more desirable traits that a candidate possesses, the more probable voters will support the candidate (Clifford 2014; Fridkin and Kenney 2011).

In sum, it is expected that the most important issue and ideal traits as defined by voters play an important part in one's decision to support a candidate. Candidates that possess characteristics voters find appealing make voters more willing to support the candidate even in the face of defeat. Moreover, when candidates speak to issues that individuals care about strongly, this should further endear the candidate to certain voters. Here, both the desired candidate traits and most important issues of Republican and Democratic presidential candidates in the 2016 primary election season are examined.

### **Explaining Turnout**

This study assumes that voters are likely to develop their candidate choice based upon a set of desired candidate traits such as honesty or experience and issues that are most relevant to individual voters. However, the likelihood that the individuals will actually turn out to vote for their preferred candidate is a different question—one that this study proposes can be answered by another set of variables. How three independent variables shape an individual's probability of showing up to vote in the 2016 primary election is investigated including an individual's enthusiasm for his or her favored candidate, how clear an individual perceives the candidate to be on an important issue, and the candidate's perceived chance of winning the party nomination.

One of the core motivations for turnout is a strong preference for one candidate over another (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974; Goldstein and Freeman 2003). While individuals may have preferred candidates, they may not always be overly enthusiastic about their choice. For instance, early in the 2016 presidential primary, there was a noted "enthusiasm gap" between Democrats supporting Hillary Clinton and Republicans supporting Donald Trump or Ted Cruz (Velencia 2016). Thus, an individual's enthusiasm for a candidate is perhaps more meaningful than simply looking at whether they have made a choice on who to support. This study argues that as an individual expresses enthusiasm for a preferred candidate, he or she will become increasingly likely to vote in the primary election.

This study also expects that individuals will consider candidates' issue positions in deciding whether or not to vote for a preferred candidate. While there is evidence that voters may prefer candidates that make ambiguous issue statements (Shepsle 1972), when it comes to issues that are highly important to an individual, candidate ambiguity may deter turnout (Ryan and Krupnikov n.d.). That is, if an individual does not believe his or her favored candidate is clear on an important issue, this may reduce the individual's propensity to expend the time and effort to turn out to vote for the candidate. Thus, it is expected that candidate clarity on an individual's

most important issue will increase the likelihood that the individual will turn out to vote in the primary election.

Finally, the impact that a candidate's perceived chance of winning the party nomination has on political participation is examined. If an individual believes that there is a very high chance that their candidate will win the nomination, they should be more likely to turn out to vote than an individual that believes their candidate will not win the party nomination. This study argues that voters will want to show their support for their favored candidate when they believe the candidate stands a chance at winning the nomination because they will want their candidate to continue to gain momentum in the campaign.

### **Research Design**

A panel study was conducted at a public university in the United States on March 8 and March 17, 2016. A total of 47 participants were recruited from two undergraduate political science courses, and completed the survey in a designated computer lab.<sup>1</sup> To ensure anonymity, each respondent was assigned a random four-digit number following the completion of the initial survey on March 8. On March 17, they were asked to input their number in order to access the survey.

Of the 47 respondents, 81 percent were male and 19 percent were female. About 79 percent of the participants were white, while 13 percent were black and 6 percent were Hispanic. The sample was also highly independent with over 30 percent of respondents refusing to identify with either political party. Only 23 percent of the sample identified as Republican, and 43 percent said they were Democrats.

### **Measuring the Dependent Variables: Candidate Choice and Turnout**

We measure a candidate's vote choice in the pre-primary survey by asking them which, of seven possible candidates, is currently their favorite. As of March 8, individuals could select from: Hillary Clinton,

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<sup>1</sup> A total of 63 individuals completed the initial survey on March 8; only 47 of those respondents completed the follow-up survey on March 17.

Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, John Kasich, or Ben Carson. All response choices were randomized.

Turnout is measured in the post-primary survey by asking individuals whether or not they voted in the Illinois primary. The variable takes on a value of “1” if the individual reported voting and “0” otherwise. As a follow-up question, respondents were asked to choose from a list of reasons what best explained why they did or did not vote in the primary.<sup>2</sup>

### **Measuring the Independent Variables**

Five independent variables are used to test expectations about a young voter’s candidate preference and whether or not he or she turned out to vote in the primary election. These explanatory variables include preferred candidate traits, the most important issue to a voter, enthusiasm for a candidacy, the clarity of the preferred candidate’s stance on an individual’s most important issue, and the perceived probability that the preferred candidate will win the party nomination.

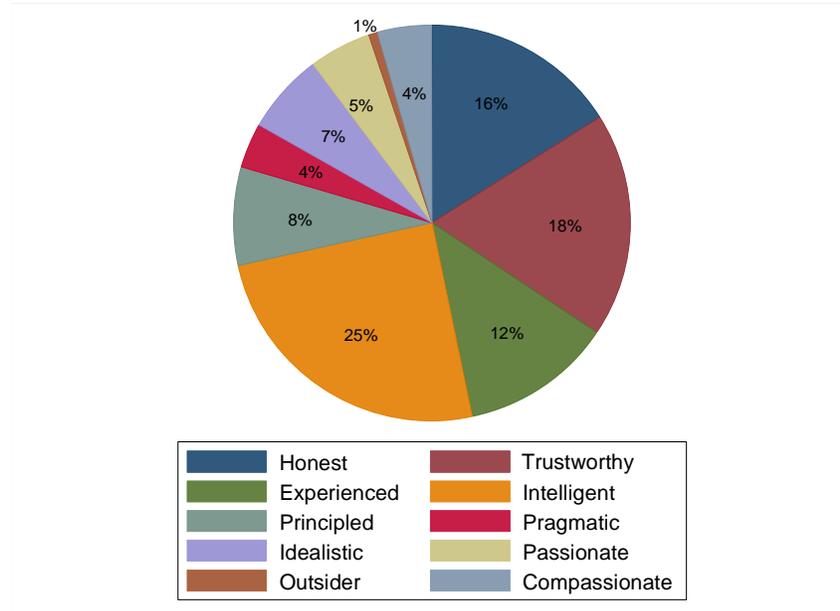
To gauge an individual’s preferred candidate traits, respondents were asked in the pre-primary survey to pick up to three traits that they believed were most important in a candidate. All trait choices were randomized in the survey. Figure 1 presents the distribution of preferred candidate traits. The top three candidate traits chosen were intelligence, trustworthiness, and honesty.

Respondents were also asked what issue was the most important to them in the pre-primary survey. Respondents were offered a variety of issues from which to choose ranging from morality issues to government corruption. Table 1 lists each of the available issues and shows the distribution of respondent choices. By far, the most important issue among young voters in 2016 was corruption in government.

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<sup>2</sup> All survey questions are available in the Appendix.

**Figure 1. Most Important Candidate Traits**



**Table 1. Most Important Issue for Young Voters in 2016**

Corruption in Gov't	26% (12)
Economy	21% (10)
Environment	15% (7)
Income Inequality	13% (6)
Education	9% (4)
Terrorism	6% (3)
National Debt	4% (2)
Immigration	2% (1)
Other	6% (3)
Total	47

Among the factors believed to shape an individual's decision on whether to turnout to vote in the 2016 primary election, it was expected that one's enthusiasm for his or her preferred candidate would weigh heavily on that decision. After each respondent selected

their favorite candidate in the pre-primary survey, he or she was asked to assess his or her enthusiasm for that candidate on an ordered scale ranging from 1 (“very unenthusiastic”) to 10 (“very enthusiastic”). On average, young voters in the panel rated their enthusiasm for their preferred candidate at 6.68 out of ten possible points.

A candidate’s perceived clarity on an important issue was measured by asking respondents to rate how clear their preferred candidate was on the issue that they considered the most important. The clarity scale ranges from 1 (“very unclear”) to 10 (“very clear”). On average, respondents rated their preferred candidate’s clarity at about 7.72 out of ten possible points.

Finally, individuals were asked in the pre-primary survey to assess their preferred candidate’s chances of winning the party nomination. Respondents were asked to rate their preferred candidate’s probability of securing the nomination on scale that ranges from 1-100 percent. The typical respondent said that he or she believed there was a 45 percent chance that their favorite candidate would win the nomination.

### **Results and Discussion**

The first dependent variable was candidate preference. This study seeks to explore the factors that influence an individual’s candidate choice by observing respondents’ opinion in the 2016 presidential primary election. Table 2 lists each available candidate, both Democrat and Republican, and shows the most common issue individuals selected as being the most important. For instance, for individuals who selected Hillary Clinton as their preferred candidate, the most often selected “most important issue” was income inequality. For those who selected Sanders as the favored candidate, which was the most common selection among the test sample, corruption in government was chosen as the most common important issue. Among Republican candidates, both Cruz and Trump supporters also said that corruption in government is the most important issue. Notably, Cruz supporters said in equal numbers that the national debt was an important issue.

Both Carson and Kasich supporters seemed equally concerned about the economy, while Rubio supporters said that immigration was the most important issue. Overall, both Democratic and Republican supporters were highly concerned about corruption in government.

**Table 2. Most Important Issue and Candidate Choice**

Democratic Candidates Most Important Issue	Republican Candidates Most Important Issue
Clinton Income inequality	Carson Economy
Sanders Corruption in Gov't	Cruz National Debt/Corruption
	Kasich Education/Economy
	Rubio Immigration
	Trump Corruption in Gov't

The respondents' concern with government corruption may partly explain the most desired candidate traits that participants selected. Table 3 shows the most commonly desired trait by candidate choice. For participants who selected Carson, Clinton, Cruz, Kasich, or Trump, the most commonly selected candidate trait was intelligence. For Cruz and Kasich, respondents said they valued trustworthiness. Similarly, for Sanders supporters, honesty was the most desired trait. And finally, for those selecting Clinton or Trump, experience was highly valued.<sup>3</sup>

In short, it appears that young voters in 2016 have strong concerns over corruption in government and, perhaps unsurprisingly, report that they value trustworthiness and honesty above almost all other candidate traits. This finding may also explain the meteoric rise

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<sup>3</sup> Clinton supporters were equally likely to select intelligence and experience as the most important candidate traits.

of Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Bernie Sanders – each perceived to be political outsiders that operate independently of the party establishment.

**Table 3. Most Desired Candidate Traits and Candidate Choice**

Four Most Desired Candidate Traits	Preferred Candidate
Intelligent	Carson, Clinton, Cruz, Kasich, Trump
Trustworthy	Cruz, Kasich
Honest	Sanders
Experienced	Clinton, Trump

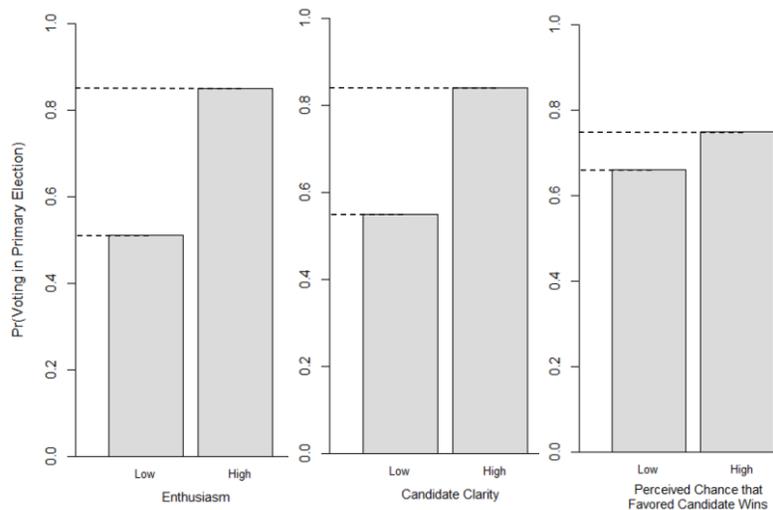
The second dependent variable was whether an individual surveyed in the pre-primary study turned out to vote in the primary, as surveyed in the post-primary study. It was proposed that three variables likely influence turnout among young voters in the 2016 presidential primary.

Figure 2 shows how the three key explanatory variables—an individual’s enthusiasm for his or her preferred candidate, a preferred candidate’s perceived clarity on an important issue, and the preferred candidate’s perceived chance of winning—influenced the likelihood that an individual turned out to vote. Because turnout is a binary variable, three bivariate logit models were used to predict an individual’s likelihood of turning out in a primary election. These logit results were then used to calculate the predicted probability of turnout, as a probability value is more meaningful than a logit coefficient. In Figure 2, a value of “1.0” represents certainty that the individual would vote; while a value of “0” denotes that the individual definitely would not vote.

The first panel shows how an individual’s enthusiasm for his or her preferred candidate impacts the likelihood that the he or she will vote. To calculate the probability of turning out to vote when an individual has low enthusiasm, the enthusiasm variable was set to its 25th percentile value. High enthusiasm is denoted by the 75th

percentile value. The results suggest that with low enthusiasm the predicted probability an individual will vote is .51. In contrast, when enthusiasm for one's preferred candidate is high, the probability that an individual will turn out to vote is about .85. In short, when an individual has high enthusiasm for his or her preferred candidate, he or she is more likely to vote than individuals who report less enthusiasm for their candidate. The probability gap between individuals with low and high enthusiasm is about .34—a sizable magnitude of effect.

**Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Voting in 2016 Primary**



The second panel of Figure 2 shows the probability of voting when one's preferred candidate is very clear (the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile value for the clarity variable) and very unclear (the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile value for clarity) on an individual's most important issue. Figure 2 shows that when an individual perceives his or her favorite candidate to be very unclear on an important issue, the predicted probability he or she will vote is .55. In contrast, when an individual believes his or her preferred candidate is very clear on an important issue, the predicted probability

an individual will vote is .84. In sum, individuals who perceive their favorite candidate to be very clear on important issues are more likely to turn out to vote than those who perceive their candidate to be ambiguous on key issues—a demobilizing effect that is suggested in past research (Milita, Ryan, and Simas 2014). The probability gap between low candidate clarity and high candidate clarity is just under .30.

Finally, the third panel of Figure 2 shows how an individual's perception of a favored candidate's chance of winning the party nomination also shapes turnout in the primary. High and low chances are denoted by the 75<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentile values, respectively. When an individual believes that there is a low chance that his or her favorite candidate will win the nomination, the individual has about a .66 probability of turning out to vote in the primary. However, individuals who believe there is a high chance that one's candidate will win the nomination, his or her probability of voting is .75. As expected, when one's favored candidate is expected to win the nomination, the probability of turning out to vote is higher than when individuals are skeptical that their candidate can ultimately pull off a win. However, it is notable that even among those who do not believe their candidate will win the nomination (i.e. those who said there is a 20 percent chance of a victorious primary outcome), the probability of turning out is still considerably higher than .5 (a 50 percent chance of voting).

Moreover, a favored candidate's perceived chance of winning appears to have the smallest effect on turnout of all three explanatory variables (calculated by subtracting the predicted probabilities at the high and low values of each independent variable) with a change in probability of only .09. In contrast, both enthusiasm and candidate clarity seem to exert a much larger substantive effect on the probability of turning out: .33 and .29 respectively. This suggests that young voters in 2016 are perhaps less motivated by the traditional tale of turning out to cast the deciding vote (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974) and more motivated by an issue or candidate trait driven mentality. Indeed, several respondents noted in an open-ended question about

what their “favorite thing” was about the 2016 campaign to date, they answered that it is important to show that there is a market for candidates like Bernie Sanders—that a presidential candidate can reject SuperPAC money, raise contributions through small donations, and speak honestly to issues such as corruption in government and still remain viable on the national stage.

### **Conclusion**

This study examines both the candidate preferences of young voters in the 2016 presidential primary and the individual-level determinants of turning out to vote for one’s preferred candidate on Primary Election Day. This study suggests that an individual’s desired candidate traits (e.g. honesty, experience) and his or her most important political issue will both influence candidate preference. Moreover, the study examines how three variables—enthusiasm for a candidacy, the clarity of the candidate on an important issue, and the candidate’s perceived chance of winning the nomination—shape whether or not an individual actually turns out to vote for his or her preferred candidate.

Candidate preference does appear to be tied to desired traits and issue preferences. In particular, a preference for honesty, the most preferred candidate trait in the sample, was associated with support for Bernie Sanders’ candidacy. Moreover, most individuals in the study selected corruption in government as their most important issue in 2016—an issue important to supporters of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump—the two outsider candidates that have gained sizable traction against all the odds and pundit predictions.

Evidence suggests that individuals who are highly enthusiastic about their preferred candidate are more likely to turn out to vote than are those that are less enthusiastic. Moreover, individuals who believe their favorite candidate has a clear stance on an important issue are significantly more likely to vote on Primary Election Day than those who perceive their candidate to be ambiguous on an important issue—suggesting that people do care about whether candidates speak to important political issues. And finally, the extent to which an individual

believes that his or her preferred candidate will win the nomination also matters, this study suggests, with regard to turnout. However, the magnitude of the effect is much smaller than enthusiasm or candidate clarity—suggesting that young voters, at least during this election cycle, seem to be focused more on their candidate’s message than on a ruthless, rational calculus.

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## Appendix: Panel Survey

### [Pre-Primary Study (before March 15)]

<pid> Generally, do you consider yourself a:

- <1> Democrat
- <2> Republican
- <3> Independent
- <4> Other

<primary> This March, which primary do you intend to vote in?

- <1> Democrat
- <2> Republican
- <3> I don't know
- <4> I do not plan to vote in the primary

<race> Are you:

- <1> White
- <2> Black
- <3> Hispanic
- <4> Asian
- <5> Other

[prefer] Which candidate do you most support right now?

- <1> Hillary Clinton
- <2> Bernie Sanders
- <3> Ted Cruz
- <4> Donald Trump
- <5> John Kasich
- <6> Ben Carson
- <7> Marco Rubio

*[programming note: whatever they select for [prefer], pipe into the blank for [enthusiasm].]*

**[enthusiasm]** How enthusiastic are you about \_\_\_\_\_'s candidacy?

- <1> Very enthusiastic
- <2> Enthusiastic
- <3> Somewhat enthusiastic
- <4> Neither enthusiastic nor unenthusiastic
- <5> Somewhat unenthusiastic
- <6> Unenthusiastic
- <7> Very unenthusiastic

*[programming note: randomize answer choices for [traits].]*

**[traits]** Do you believe that it is important for a candidate to be:  
(Check up to three)

- <1> Honest
- <2> Trustworthy
- <3> Experienced
- <4> Intelligent
- <5> Principled
- <6> Pragmatic
- <7> Idealistic
- <8> Passionate
- <9> Outsider
- <10> Compassionate
- <11> None of the above

*[programming note: randomize answer choices for [issues].]*

**[issues]** What do you believe is the most important issues facing us today? (Check one)

- <1> Immigration
- <2> Income inequality
- <3> Abortion
- <4> Taxes
- <5> National debt
- <6> Terrorism
- <7> Economy
- <8> Environment
- <9> Health care
- <10> Criminal justice
- <11> Education
- <12> Privacy/Data security
- <13> Moral values
- <14> Corruption in government

*[programming note: requires piping in most important issue & candidate preference; need slider 1-10]*

[clarity] On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being very clear and 1 being very unclear, how clear do you believe \_\_\_\_\_'s stance on \_\_\_\_\_ is?

1 (Very unclear) \_\_\_\_\_ 10 (Very clear)

*[Programming Note: Students will be assigned a random four-digit number at the end of the survey; they will be provided with a pen and notecard to write this number down. They will be told that they will need this number to connect their responses in the pre-primary survey with those of the post-primary survey.]*

[chances] What do you believe is [favorite candidate's] probability of winning the [party] nomination?  
1% \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

**[Post Primary Follow-up Survey (After March 15)]**

<vote> Did you vote in the Illinois primary?

<1> Yes

<2> No

*[Programming Note: If no, participant answers vote\_other & why\_no]*

<vote\_other> Did you vote in a different state's primary?

<1> Yes

<2> No

<why\_no> Which of the following best describes why you did not vote in the primary election? [Select all that apply.]

<1> I didn't care.

<2> My vote wouldn't have mattered.

<3> My favorite candidate dropped out of the race.

<4> I was too busy.

<5> I'm not a US citizen.

<6> I don't know.

[Programming Note: If yes, participant answers why yes]

<why\_yes> Which of the following best describes why you voted in the primary election? [Select all that apply.]

<1> I wanted to support my favorite candidate.

<2> I wanted to make sure an undesirable candidate didn't win the primary.

<3> I believe voting is important.

<4> My family and/or friends asked me to vote.

<5> I don't know.

<prefer2> Which candidate do you most support right now?

<1> Hillary Clinton

<2> Bernie Sanders

<3> Ted Cruz

<4> Donald Trump

<5> John Kasich

<6> Marco Rubio

<7> Ben Carson

<gen\_elec> Do you anticipate turning out to vote in the general election in November?

<1> Yes

<2> No

<3> I don't know.