



Young People's Interest in Voting and Civic Engagement: Interviews with Adolescents in the Midwest

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Gen Z's potential role in shaping the political landscape in 2024 and beyond

An estimated 8.3 million young people will be eligible to vote for the first time in the upcoming 2024 U.S. election.¹ These young voters, along with 32.5 million other eligible members of Gen Z (ages 20-27 in 2024), wield considerable influence in shaping the upcoming political landscape, making up nearly 17% of the total number of eligible voters in the 2024 election.² Gen Z has already garnered a reputation for their high levels of civic engagement, which is reflected in census voting data; in the 2022 midterm elections, Gen Z voted at a higher rate than older generations did in their first midterm election, with 28.4% of young people ages 18-24 casting a ballot.³ While Gen Z involvement in the upcoming political election is unknown, qualitative research into their civic behavior can help to illuminate topics and reasons for political engagement.

The unique political perspective of Gen Z

As a generation, Gen Z came of age during a period of significant division and uncertainty, giving them a unique political perspective.^{3,4} Not only were they witnesses to several landmark social movements—the rise of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, response to gun violence and the climate crisis—but many of the new voting members of Gen Z have also participated in and led activism.¹ They have felt firsthand the impact of these issues and their political involvement have been significantly shaped by them.^{4,5} Gen Z is also a highly diverse generation, with approximately 48% of eligible voters ages 18-25 identifying as people of color.⁶ Gen Z adults are also more likely than older generations to identify as LGBTQ+, with 1 in 4 identifying as a sexual orientation other than straight.⁶ Their diverse identities and experiences impact their civic identities, yet limited research has investigated exactly how they influence Gen Z's specific voting motivation and efficacy.

Young people care about civic engagement and are knowledgeable about political issues

We sought to explore adolescent perspectives on voting and civic engagement prior to their first presidential election, particularly in light of the *Dobbs v. Jackson U.S. Supreme Court* decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* and an increasing wave of anti-transgender legislation. Between April and June of 2023, we conducted interviews with 39 young people aged 16-19 living in the Midwest (IL, WI, IN, IA, MI, OH, MN) from diverse backgrounds. Participants also completed a short survey to capture their perspectives on the importance of civic engagement, bodily autonomy, gender affirming care, and abortion access. Most participants identified as cisgender women (68.3%) and as a race other than white (63.5%). Around half of participants (46.3%) identified as straight, with 17.1% identifying as bisexual. Most participants (85.4%) attended public school and (51.2%) resided in suburban areas.



Overall, participants believed that it's important for people to be civically engaged, with two-thirds of participants rating it as extremely important on the survey. All the young people we spoke with planned to vote in the future. Many participants desired to vote in all elections, not just presidential elections. Voting was viewed as a privilege and a civic duty by many participants. For instance, one participant expressed that they believe "because we have the power to vote, then we should exercise it when we can." Another participant expressed that they felt motivated to vote because "the government and politics exist for people. They were created for the people and they exist for the people. If we don't exist then there's no such thing as government."

Some young people also mentioned that voting was a way to show that their voice mattered. One participant mentioned that some of their family members do not vote, which motivated them to vote themselves:

"[W]hat interests me in voting because voting is a part of your free will and you have the ability to vote and change things. That's what I find is important and I find that a lot of people around me in general just decide not to vote because they feel like their voice doesn't matter."

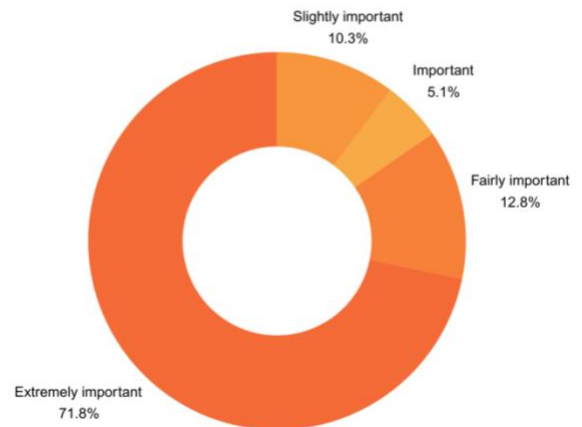
While most were knowledgeable about voting, a few were unsure of how to vote or what elections to vote in. For many, concerns about voter suppression and logistical voting barriers were prominent, with several hoping to see voting become more accessible, especially for those who have been historically excluded from political participation.

Young people were knowledgeable about current social and political issues. For instance, almost all the adolescents we spoke with were aware of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, with many also knowledgeable about the specific restrictions in their states. Not only are they well-informed, but young people also have strong opinions influenced by their own lived experiences. Many expressed feeling that the United States is regressing, especially in the past few years. For example, when asked how abortion bans make them feel, one participant responded: "I feel like we're regressing versus progressing as a society." Young people care about a diverse array of issues, ranging from mental health to anti-racism to the environment. Many of the participants felt that voting gave them the power to help address and correct the problems they perceive in the United States.

Young people are civically engaged

Young people are politically engaged and informed prior to turning 18. Many of the young people we spoke with felt frustrated that their voice would only be heard when they were able to vote, expressing a desire to vote at a younger age. For many, this frustration translated into civic engagement prior to being eligible to cast their ballot. Data from a national survey of Gen Z'ers highlighted that they are significantly less likely than older generations to believe that voting is the most effective way to enact change in the U.S.⁶ This perspective was somewhat reflected in our interviews with Gen Z teens. The young people we spoke with mentioned several avenues they took for participating in political and social movements other than voting, including

Participants' Reported Importance of Civic Engagement



attending protests, educating themselves and others, calling their local representatives, posting on social media, and signing petitions. Some participants had not yet engaged in these activities but were interested in doing so in the future for causes they cared about.

Technology and social media have shaped, but not defined, young peoples' sense of civic engagement

Gen Z is also among the first generations to have early access to cellphones and social media, enabling early exposure to global issues and rapid access to information.⁶ Digital media is an often-used avenue to stay up-to-date with public life, especially among Gen Z.⁷ Several of the participants in our sample cited social media as their primary news source. Some participants expressed that they stay civically engaged through posting on social media about political issues. However, others expressed hesitation or doubt about posting online, particularly about whether it has social impact. Some participants mentioned that they wished social media was less political. Social media also stood out as an issue that young people are particularly concerned about, especially regarding mental health and wellbeing.

Some participants expressed frustration with their generation's perception by older Americans, especially with the stereotype that Gen Z is technology obsessed. While many young people rely on social media to learn about and stay engaged with political issues, they also want policymakers to understand that their perspectives are not a sole product of these platforms. For example, when asked what they'd like policymakers to know about their perspectives, one participant shared:

"I would say I would want them to know that my perspectives are not a product of social media influencing or brainwashing or whatever the excuses that they use are. I would say they're a result of genuine self-reflection and genuinely thinking about how I want the laws of the country that I live in to affect me and to what extent I want them to affect my autonomy."

This theme is consistent with data from a national survey that found that a majority of Gen Z adults (64%) believe that older generations will never fully understand the struggles facing young people.⁶

Young people's hope for the future

Despite their dissatisfaction with the current political climate in the U.S., many young people remain hopeful and enthusiastic about instigating change. When asked what changes they hope for, our sample wished to see a greater distinction between political and medical issues, increased freedom for personal decision-making, and for policymakers to take the opinions of young people more seriously. As Gen Z prepares to vote in the upcoming election, our research suggests they're committed to making their voices and opinions heard, hoping to shape a better future for themselves and their communities.

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