



iGNiTE

**CATALYZING
GEN Z
POLITICAL
POWER**

Focus Group Findings Spring 2024

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Most youth voting organizations focus on registering and mobilizing voters. In the volatile policy landscape of 2024, this is no longer enough.

We cannot take the Gen Z vote for granted. A Harvard Kennedy School poll of 2,098 young people ages 18-29 (conducted between October 23 and November 6, 2023) shows that young people are less likely to vote in 2024 than in 2020, and that young women are less likely to vote than young men.

What will it take to drive young people towards political and civic engagement? We decided to ask them directly. This presentation outlines the findings from a first set of focus groups conducted in the Spring of 2024. It complements IGNITE's [2023 survey](#) on Gen Z voting and political engagement.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



- IGNITE in partnership with Sago Strategy + Insight conducted online focus groups with students currently attending college or university in four metro areas: Phoenix, Atlanta, Houston, and Philadelphia; and with one national group representing students from community colleges.
- All respondents were members of Gen Z.
- Focus groups were conducted April 9-11, 2024.
- A total of 41 college students participated. (17 male, 23 female, 1 genderqueer, nonconfirming).
- Respondents received \$125 for their participation except in Phoenix, where they were paid \$150 due to lower recruiting incidence.



PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Key Finding #1: Gen Z is frustrated with the current political climate, saying everything feels too “extreme” and absolutist with no room for discourse.

Respondents expressed that **they see no way in and no way through any conversation** without fear of political tension or reprisal.

Respondents across this study are **extremely disappointed with the current state of politics**. They say it’s become so divisive and polarized that only extreme views align with the two parties. College students can’t relate. Their views are more nuanced, with some admitting they are still sorting out political alignment.



A lot of things are so polarized that it’s like, can I make a difference? Can I share my opinion...without them immediately rejecting any sort of idea or outlook?” (Atlanta)



I don’t think our voices are being heard, but I also think this generation is like one of the last ones to actually listen and try to change things.” (Philadelphia)



It’s so polarized that there is really no upside for the actual country, but I think it’s made a lot of people a lot of money.” (Philadelphia)

PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE



Key Finding #2: Gen Z wants to engage but they feel marginalized, overlooked. They don't see themselves reflected in the leadership or direction of this country.

Respondents want **younger candidates who can be believably sympathetic to the needs of this generation**, who feel they face a drastically different future than Gen X or Boomer generations.

Gen Z college students strongly imply they **crave statesmanship in their politicians**.

They're looking for a **new political hero** and feel it's been a while. They want younger candidates who can be believably sympathetic to the needs of this generation.

“ We care about things and we wanna change it and we wanna feel like we're involved, but I think we're just being like neglected almost. We need our voices to be sought after more.” (Community College)

“ When you have old white men being politicians, you get an old white man view. You can't apply that view today, especially now in 2024. It don't work out.” (Philadelphia)

PARTY AFFILIATION



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Key Finding #1: There is pressure to 'pick a side' and the impact trickles into their friendships and lives.

Respondents are emphatically **reluctant to verbalize their support of either party** – even among those who align with a party at the ballot box.

They believe that open declaration of party affiliation carries a stigma. Despite the prevalence of politics in everyday living, respondents don't feel they belong in a box or under a label.

“ I feel like the moment you kind of like reveal if you're Democratic or Republican, I feel like depending on that person's preference, I feel like they'll kind of see you in a different way.” (Phoenix)

“ If you say you believe in one thing, people automatically think that you also believe in a whole set of other things that are associated with a particular political party.” (Houston)

“ I don't really like to involve myself in political conversations that aren't super open because I don't want to feel like I have to walk on eggshells talking about something.” (Atlanta)

PARTY AFFILIATION



Key Finding #2: The political parties do not adequately encapsulate respondents' priorities or personal values

Respondents seek candidates who appear to be realistic about potential challenges and scenarios, who can vocalize their 1st 100 day strategies, and outline their approaches to overcoming obstacles in achieving desired goals.

Respondents see the following as potential paths to accepting the realities of our two-party system:

- Vote for the individual vs. the party
- Seek objective vs. partisan viewpoints
- Do your homework
- Demand mental health checks on candidates
- Demand transparency from candidates, as marked by people who appear to be realistic about potential challenges and scenarios when in office.



I don't think either party produces beneficial change and I feel like both are just very performative and we're not actually getting any work done." (Atlanta)



I feel like the best thing a politician can do is do the action first....then people will think they're more serious about things getting done." (Phoenix)



Nothing gets done." (Phoenix)



VOTING AND ENGAGEMENT

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Key Finding #1: All feel voting is important and that their vote matters, but they're generally not too excited about the presidential election in November.

Respondents feel they can make the greatest impact down-ballot, all the way at the local level:

- State reps
- Judges
- Superintendents
- Mayors

They expressed some mistrust of voting system, being more frustrated with the electoral college than with voting integrity or security.

“ I feel it’s my duty to vote, so I’m gonna do it no matter who the candidates are.” (Houston)

“ “If I don’t vote I can’t complain.” (Atlanta)

“ “Where it gets hard to vote is you need to either pick a side or just not vote at all, and it doesn’t feel right to not vote at all.” (Houston)

“ “I feel like I’m kind of really done with this idea that I have to vote for the lesser of two evils.” (Community College)

VALUES AND CONCERNS

**STUDENTS DESERVE
SAFE KIT ACCESSIBILITY**

#AB1138
#SAFE





Key Finding #1: Gen Z wants candidates that can act quickly on issues and make change happen faster than others.

Respondents' primary economic and social concerns include:

- Cost of housing
- Tuition
- Global conflict
- “Basic” human rights
- Sexuality
- Gender
- Reproductive rights
- Issues close to home – homelessness in Houston and Hawaii, for example



I just think that they don't care [about Gen Z]. If they cared, they would follow through on the campaigns that they promote.” (Houston)



They're not gonna be alive to live through the changes they make. We're gonna have to deal with that.” (Phoenix)

VALUES AND CONCERNS



Key Finding #2: Female respondents expressed more concerns around human rights, gender and racial equality. While males generally agreed in response..

Both men and women point to politics as a male-dominated field, although women express more need for female candidates. Overall, Gen Z doesn't feel strongly that gender is a factor that would make or break a vote.

Males vocalized concerns about economy and personal finances more than females.

Females were more emphatic about the importance of voting.

“ I try and make sure who I'm voting for, they are in support of women having bodily autonomy since it's up to the states now, um, to make that decision” (Phoenix)

“ I think I definitely agree that it would be nice to see a woman in power and I think that she could contribute a lot of things that might've been overlooked already, but I also think that that wouldn't be a deciding factor for somebody's gender identity in my voting” (Philadelphia)

“ I plan on voting because, um, like I said, my dad came from Iran 79 and um, uh, there's a conflict in the Middle East right now” (Houston)



THE BIG PICTURE: GEN Z POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT



This is a generation **determined to take action to alleviate the stress and concerns of broken systems**, including the U.S. political system; they feel the risk of inaction is too high.



Gen Z is poised to vote in November 2024, but this generation **feels frustrated, unheard, and has strong reservations around political parties**.



Gen Z is boasting the **highest voter registration rate we've ever seen** for this age group (18-25). Approximately 75 percent of respondents are registered to vote.



We can't take their political action or loyalty for granted. Gen Z is particularly interested in engaging with candidates in local and regional elections who speak to the change in values that they want to see in politics. Candidates and elected officials who are serious about courting Gen Z's vote will **need to go the extra mile to engage them authentically and respond to their concerns with action**, not just words.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Continue to listen.

IGNITE will conduct a second set of focus groups in August, and explore the extent to which Gen Z feels “Democracy” is on the line in November.

2

Ensure messaging to young people speaks to these learnings ahead of November 2024.

3

Create spaces for young people to develop practical skills for engaging in dialogue and healthy political discourse.

4

Engage Gen Z around voting and their civic engagement year after year, **not just on election years.**

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