

VOTING & POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG GEN Z COLLEGE STUDENTS

2024 REPORT

#PoliticalFam

#DeclareYourAmbition

POLITICAL POWER
IN EVERY YOUNG
WOMAN

IGNITE
the vote
2024

IGNITE

POLITICAL POWER IN EVERY YOUNG WOMAN

INTRODUCTION

Since our founding in 2010, IGNITE has trained 40,000+ young women to become the next generation of political leaders as candidates, campaigners, voter mobilizers, policymakers and advocates. IGNITE began conducting academic research in 2019 to measure our impact and gain a deeper understanding of the concerns and needs of Generation Z (“Gen Z”), especially cis and trans women, non-binary and gender-expansive youth, to promote their leadership and political engagement. The [IGNITE Research Hub](#) now conducts annual research in partnership with leading political scientists and researchers to better understand Gen Z’s political participation, behaviors and mindset.

Our 2024 research was made possible by generous support from Edie Lycke, Grantmakers for Girls of Color, Everett Family Foundation, Quinn Delaney and Wayne Jordan, Open Society Foundations and Way to Rise.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

IGNITE research identifies and follows overarching trends in Gen Z political and civic engagement, seeking to understand what makes this generation unique. Findings are made publicly available to support the work of our partners and other key stakeholders, including nonprofits, electeds, foundations and the media.

In 2024, IGNITE partnered with Sago Strategy + Insight to conduct two studies that shed light on Gen Z college students’ political engagement, voting behaviors and sentiment around issues and candidates. The data from the first study comprises a series of focus groups conducted at two points in time (April 2024 and August 2024), and the second study consists of a survey of 1,004 college students across the country fielded August 7-27, 2024.

This report showcases insights from the aforementioned qualitative and quantitative research conducted throughout 2024.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Focus Groups: In partnership with IGNITE, Sago Strategy + Insight conducted two rounds of online focus groups with students attending two and four year colleges in four metro areas: Phoenix and environs, Atlanta, Houston, Michigan and Philadelphia. An additional focus group focused on students attending community college in the US.

The first set of focus groups were conducted April 9-11, 2024 (“April focus groups”). The second set was conducted August 5-8, 2024 (“August focus groups”), 16 days after Kamala Harris emerged as the Democratic presidential candidate, and one day following the announcement of Tim Walz as Harris’ running mate. A total of 80 students participated across both waves of focus groups. Respondents received \$125 for their participation, except in Phoenix where they received an additional \$25 due to lower recruiting incidence.

Survey: The quantitative research objectives centered on understanding and defining the voting behaviors, candidate impressions, and issues that matter most to Gen Z college students. IGNITE commissioned a survey of college students conducted by Sago Strategy + Insight fielded August 7-27, 2024. The survey included a cross-section of 1,004 respondents attending two and four-year colleges, aged 18-25 from 48 states and the District of Columbia. Twenty percent of the respondents identified as living in swing-states: North Carolina, Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, Georgia, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. All respondents were members of Gen Z. 56% of respondents attend a four-year college or university and 44% are enrolled in a two-year college. The data is weighted to match 2019 Pew Analysis of the 2018 US Census Current Population Survey benchmarks for age, race and ethnicity so it closely resembles the demographic makeup of the US public. This allowed us to gain a deep understanding of college students’ voting behaviors, while ensuring we consider the data within the context of Gen Z as a whole.

Important! Throughout the study, when referring to the gender of respondents, we indicate “Men” and “Women,” where “Women” refers to all cis and trans women and non-binary respondents, and “Men” refers to all cis and trans men respondents.

KEY FINDINGS

1



On Voting: Gen Z college students understand that voting matters and they intend to vote, but are deterred by common barriers from not knowing how to vote or find their polling location. In our survey, 84% of respondents reported being registered to vote. Of the Gen Z participants who said they were not registered to vote, 9% said their primary reason for not being registered was because they don't know how to register.

2



On the 2024 Presidential Candidates: Gen Z college students, specifically 55% of Gen Z women, indicated that they plan to vote for Kamala Harris. At the time the August focus groups were held and the survey was fielded, Kamala Harris had just become the presumptive nominee for the Democratic ticket. Respondents indicated wanting to learn more about her policy positions and generally favored her candidacy over Donald Trump's. The main takeaway from this research – in alignment with previous IGNITE research since 2019 – is that Gen Z continues to show limited interest in party politics and partisanship and instead prefers to engage with specific issues. They crave candidates that speak to their experiences and that better represent their diversity.

3



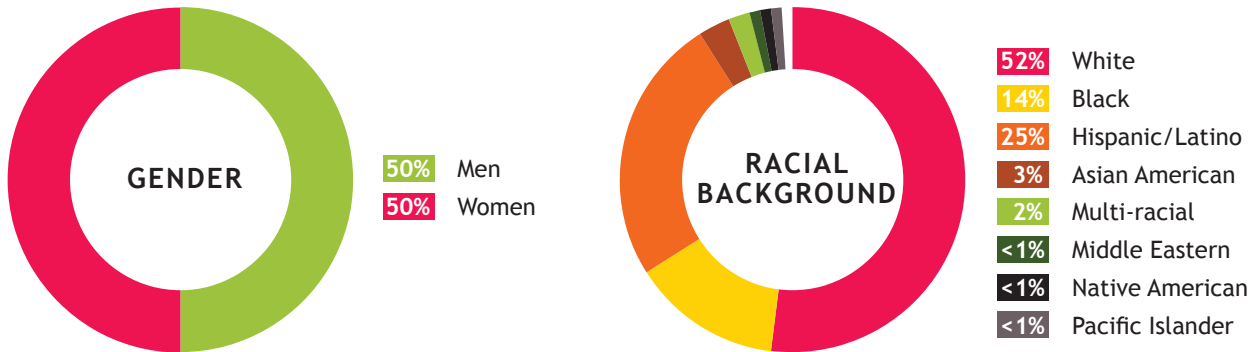
On the Issues: The focus groups revealed that the economy, particularly the cost of living, is one of the top urgent issues for Gen Z. Across focus group conversations, economic stress, including issues like housing, student debt and medical expenses, emerged consistently without prompting. Our survey placed mass shootings at the top of their critical issues, and consistent with previous IGNITE research, **abortion access remained a critical issue**, particularly among cis and trans women and nonbinary Gen Zers.

4



On the Political Landscape: Focus group respondents voiced concerns that US politics continue to be too divisive, and they seek and respect moderate views. Both our qualitative and quantitative data reveals a frustration with partisan politics among Gen Z with 34% of survey respondents identifying as Independent or Unsure. Our focus groups shed light on their need for open spaces for political dialogue, and a desire to see candidates that align with their values and prioritize concrete policy solutions rather than divisive rhetoric.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SURVEY SAMPLE



AGE



GEN Z COLLEGE STUDENT VIEWS ON VOTING

Overall, participants in the focus groups and respondents to the survey reported that voting matters. The vast majority (84%) of survey respondents reported they are registered to vote. When looking at whether this will translate to actual votes, 76% expressed an intent to vote (55% said absolutely certain, while 21% said they’re likely to vote). Both the qualitative and quantitative data both revealed barriers, especially not knowing how to navigate the logistics of voting and their belief that their vote doesn’t matter unless they reside in a swing state.

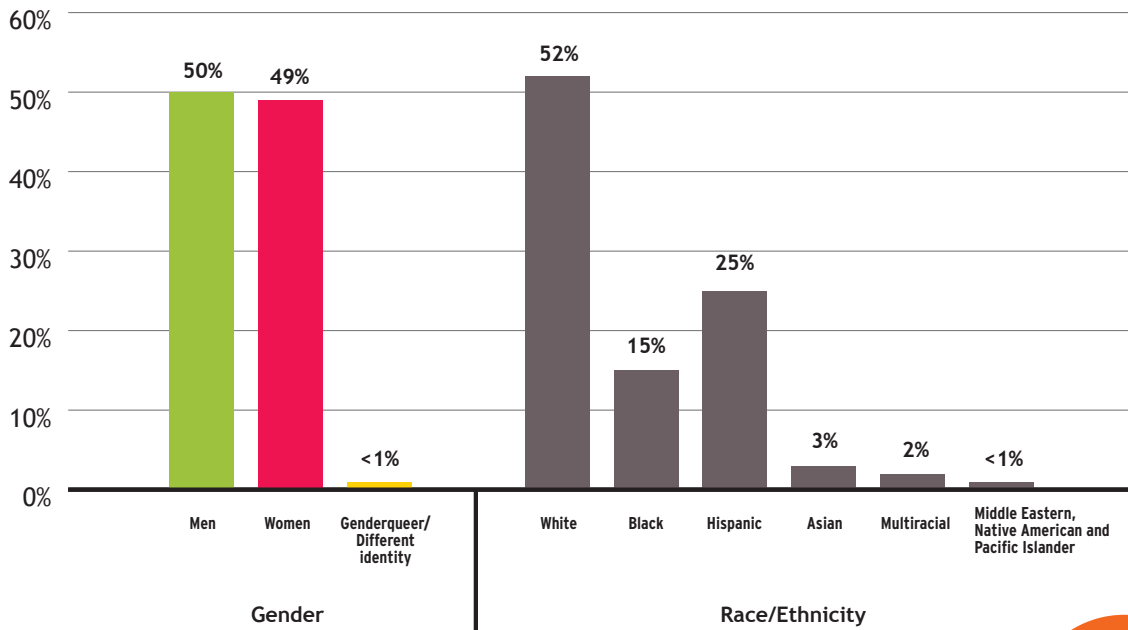
Respondents in the August focus groups shared that they care a lot about the outcome of the November election (4 or 5 on scale of 1 to 5), but they are less convinced that their vote can shape the outcome (3 on scale of 1 to 5). April focus group respondents expressed similar sentiments.

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

“If I don’t vote I can’t complain.” (APRIL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT)

“It kind of depends on where you’re living. I’ll be voting in Pennsylvania, and it’s more of a swing state.” (AUGUST FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT)

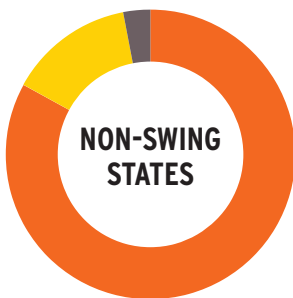
VOTER REGISTRATION:



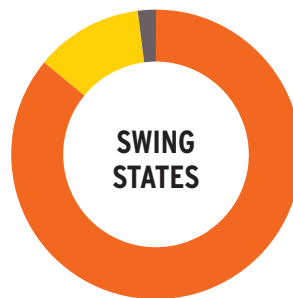
84% of survey respondents indicated they are currently registered to vote.



VOTER REGISTRATION BY SWING STATES:

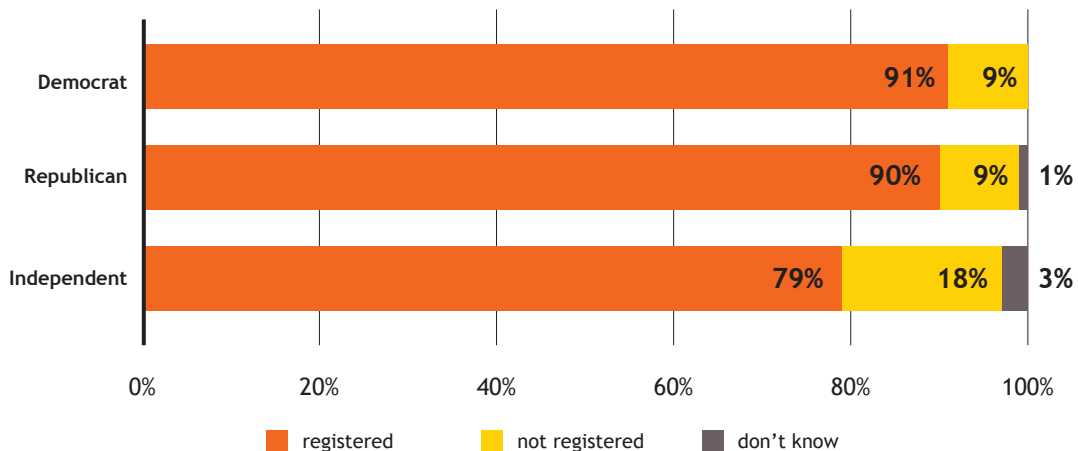


84% registered to vote
14% not registered
3% don't know or unsure



87% registered to vote
12% not registered
2% don't know or unsure

VOTER REGISTRATION BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION:

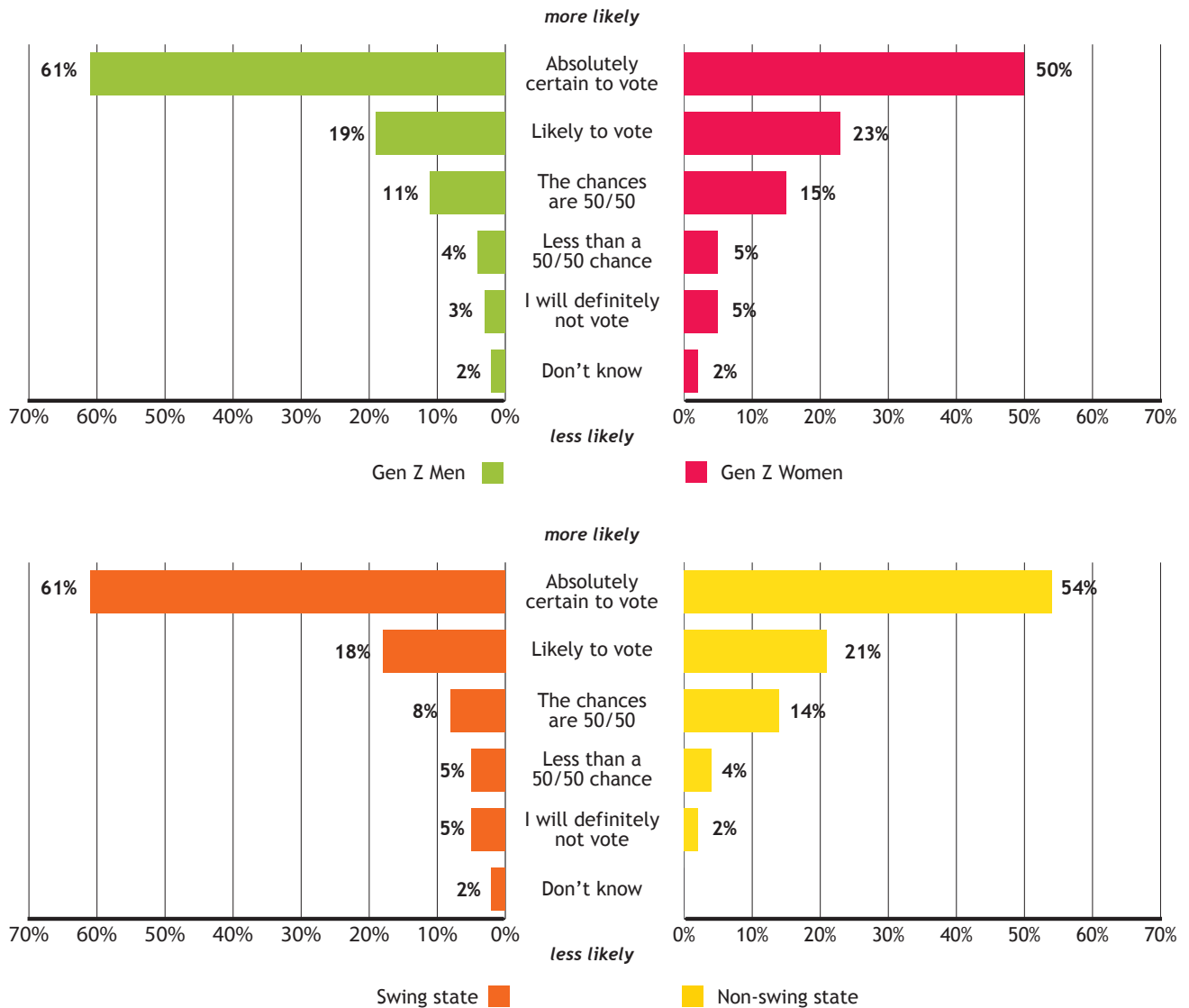


TOP 5 REASONS FOR NOT BEING REGISTERED TO VOTE

Close to half of unregistered respondents are not registered for reasons that could be solved with information or support.

1	“I don’t want to vote, so I don’t need to register”	31%
2	“I intend to register, but haven’t gotten around to it”	21%
3	“There has not been a candidate or issue that has inspired me to register”	14%
4	“I don’t know how to register”	9%
5	“I’m not sure where I will be living in the near future, so I am unsure what address to use when I register to vote”	7%

2024 VOTING INTENTION:



GEN Z COLLEGE STUDENTS & THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The August focus groups and the survey were conducted just as Kamala Harris became the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee. During the first set of focus groups in April, respondents articulated their desire for younger and more diverse candidates. There was a palpable fatigue with “politics as usual.” In comparison, August focus group participants and survey respondents showed greater interest in Kamala Harris’ candidacy while indicating a need to learn more about her policy positions.

In the August focus groups, most respondents leaned toward Harris, citing her positions regarding social policy and human rights. Those undecided were awaiting her policy platform.

“With Harris being newer into the election, I don’t know a whole lot about what she plans to do.”

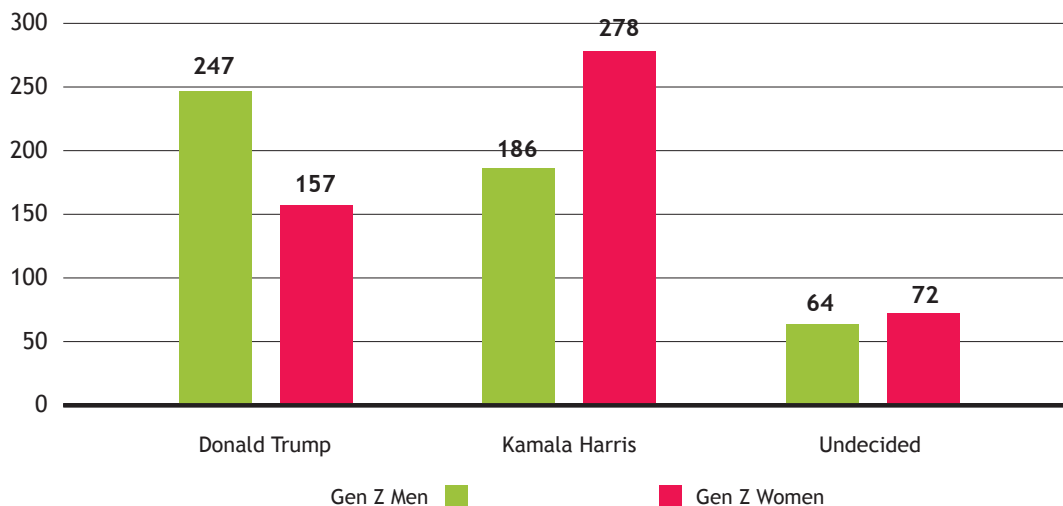
Those favoring Trump were more confident that Trump could better address inflation than Harris. They struggled with Trump’s divisive rhetoric, but not to the point of changing their votes. Trump supporters felt he’s a known entity when compared to Kamala Harris.

“I’ll stick with the devil I know versus the devil I don’t.”

Project 2025 unaided mentions were common, and some respondents cited this initiative as a reason to be less in favor of Trump and more inclined to vote for Harris.

The survey asked respondents to indicate who they planned to vote for. Below is a snapshot of where young people stood in August 2024.

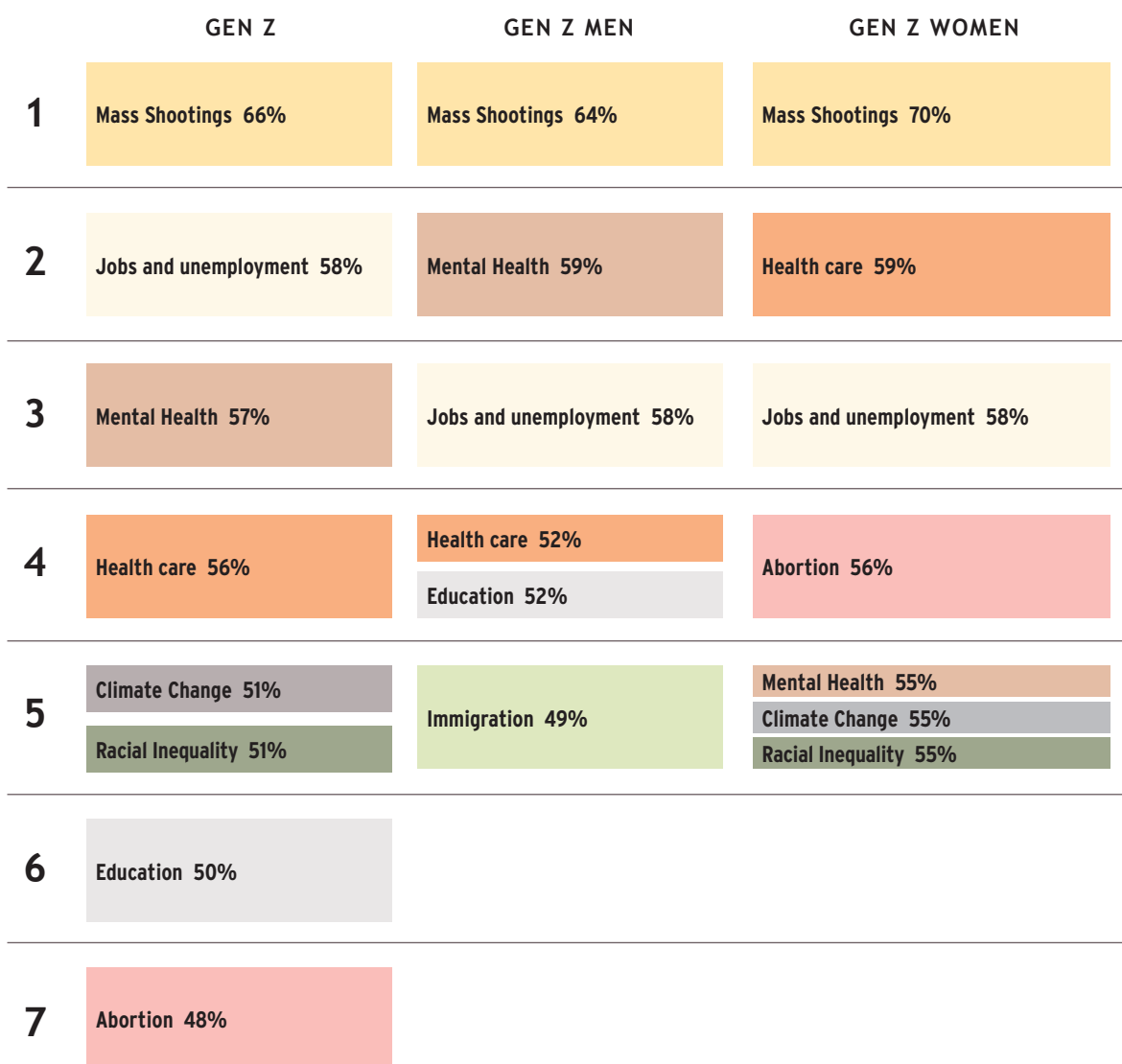
CANDIDATES GEN Z COLLEGE STUDENTS PLAN TO VOTE FOR:



GEN Z COLLEGE STUDENTS & THEIR MOST CRITICAL ISSUES

Since 2019, IGNITE has been conducting research to understand Gen Z’s entry points into politics and civic engagement. We have consistently found mass shootings to be their top issue. 2024 was no exception. Abortion has remained a top five issue specifically for young cis and trans women and nonbinary Gen Zers. Our 2024 survey of college students remained consistent with these previous studies looking into Gen Z as a whole.

Importantly, the survey showed that jobs and unemployment are among the top five concerns for Gen Z college students across gender, whereas previous IGNITE studies of Gen Z showed this issue as top five only for men. The rise in priority of jobs and unemployment across the board is consistent with the focus group findings, in which economic concerns emerged as a clear and urgent priority for respondents.



For reference, below are the issues prioritized by Gen Z respondents in [IGNITE's fall 2023 survey](#):

	GEN Z	GEN Z MEN	GEN Z WOMEN
1	Mass Shootings 77%	Mass Shootings 68%	Mass Shootings 84%
2	Mental Health 64%	Jobs and Unemployment 58%	Mental Health 69%
3	Healthcare 62%	Mental Health 58%	Healthcare 68%
4	Climate Change 58%	Education 57%	Racial Inequality 68%
5	Education 58%	Healthcare 56%	Abortion 65%

Economic stress emerged as a theme across our August focus groups:

“I’m gonna have to work like two jobs just to be able to live somewhere and I might have to have roommates until I’m in my thirties if it stays this way.”

“It’s almost unbearable.”

“If I graduate and I don’t end up with this offer, then what will I do?”

August respondents cited high prices and poor wages, even among those who have secured or are seeking full-time, salaried jobs. Gen Zers see what they believe is a broken system that does not deliver for them.

“As a young person, I feel so much anxiety about housing [and] the cost of living. I mean, rent is crazy. And in addition to that, the minimum wage is extremely disproportionate to what things cost today. But I also feel like raising minimum wage is kind of putting a band-aid on a bullet wound.”

“Data can be manipulated. I saw a report of 300,000 new jobs, but it’s 300,000 people [that] got a second job because they need to get a second job.”

“Just because there’s jobs doesn’t mean that they’re paying a livable wage.”

Read more about the issues discussed in August focus groups at IGNITENational.org/Research.



GEN Z COLLEGE STUDENT VIEWS ON THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Our focus group research offered a deeper, more nuanced look into Gen Z sentiment around politics and voting. It is clear that Gen Z feels frustrated with the current political climate, saying everything feels too “extreme” and absolutist with no room for discourse.

Respondents in the April focus [groups](#) expressed that they see no way in and no way through any conversation without fear of political tension or reprisal. They also voiced deep disappointment with the current state of politics, saying it’s become so divisive and polarized that only extreme views align with the two parties. They are craving a middle ground and safe spaces for political discourse.

“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?” (APRIL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT)

“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.” (APRIL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT)

“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.” (APRIL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT)

Both sets of focus groups show that Gen Z college students [approach partisanship and political ideology with more reservation](#) than past generations, rejecting partisan labels at a higher rate than the general population. This matches previous studies by IGNITE of Gen Z as a whole. April respondents shared that neither political party – Republican or Democrat – reflects their priorities or values.

“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.”

(APRIL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT)

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations offer practical ways to engage with Gen Z around politics, taking into consideration learnings from this report:

1



Build bridges and engage meaningfully. Create open and welcoming spaces for young people to engage in political discussions. Emphasize best practices in healthy discourse and participate in the conversation, making sure to listen to their concerns, validate their experiences, and find ways to create intergenerational dialogue and trust.

2



Lean into local issues and policies. In the current political landscape, young people care more about issues than candidates or parties, and they are seeking out solutions. Tap into the change they want to see, and connect that change to voting. When the presidential election feels removed from their daily reality, emphasize the importance of down ballot voting. Illustrate how voting at every level can help shape leadership and decision-making, which will impact them in very concrete ways. Safe streets, access to parks and their education are all on the line.

3



Don't just ask young people to vote, equip them with the knowledge on how to do so. Gen Zers know voting matters, but they don't always know how to translate that knowledge into action. Not knowing how or where to vote remains a main reason many are unregistered or don't make it to the ballot box. Provide them with resources or direct them to organizations like IGNITE for support. Direct them to: ignitenational.org/vote.

4



Remember that the work of engaging young people and supporting their civic engagement doesn't end after a presidential or midterm election. Building and maintaining a healthy democracy depends on having engaged citizens with agency to shape policy and leadership. Framing voting as a chore that pops up only during midterms and presidential elections shortchanges young people who have a great deal to offer through their civic leadership.

5



Advocate for policies that protect voting rights like the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would amend the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to address discriminatory voting practices. It seeks to protect all Americans' right to vote.