

The Kids (18-29) Aren't Alright: Youth Apathy in the Era of Social Media Politics

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a survey conducted to understand young voters. The survey was conducted from November 19-20, 2024, using an online panel provided by CINT to collect data. Given the increase in political apathy among young people and the role that social media and generational divides play in shaping political discourse, this paper examines how the 2024 presidential election influences the political engagement and trust of 18 to 29-year-olds. It focuses on voting patterns, issue prioritization, and attitudes toward party alignment and election integrity.

Literature Review

The focus on youth voter turnout has been in the minds of politicians and political actors for a long time in the United States. However, according to Vinay Khosla, “Youth voters, defined by the US Census Bureau as voters aged 18-29, have composed the smallest portion of American voters in every presidential election since 1988, never reaching above even 19% of all voters who cast ballots” (2022).

The rise of the digital age has significantly influenced political engagement among young voters, introducing factors such as social media advertisements from campaigns and the influence of political branding. Research indicates that Gen Z voters are politically aware but remain skeptical of the political system’s ability to address their concerns, especially those surrounding social issues like abortion and climate change (Banerjee et al., 2022, p. 485). This skepticism is reflected in their voting patterns and interactions with political content on digital platforms. According to *“Who Cares?”: Young Adolescents’ Perceived Barriers to Civic Action* by Michelle Bauml, Victoria Smith, and Brooke Blevins, youth apathy is compounded by perceived structural barriers and societal attitudes that frame youth as incapable or disengaged from meaningful civic action (p. 1).

Party loyalty is a critical factor in maintaining long-term voter engagement. According to *Brand love and party preference of young political consumers*, Saikat Banerjee and Bibek Ray Chaudhuri find that “Love for a political party originates from a party’s ability to enhance voters’ inner and social self.” Younger demographics prioritize symbolic identity in their political choice, and this aligns with findings that suggest political brand trust fosters sustained voter confidence, even amid competitive campaigns or anti-incumbency sentiments (Banerjee et

al., 2022, p. 481). However, young voters remain independent, and their participation is inconsistent. There is a disconnect between the current political strategies and tactics that move beyond branding to engage the youth vote authentically.

In *Political Partisanship and Youth Voters*, Vinay Khlosa's findings assert that political polarization has a nuanced impact on youth engagement. When interviewing young voters about why they voted in the 2020 election, “high levels of polarization [Donald Trump] perpetuated within the United States’ political systems was a motivation for voting” (Khlosa, 2022, p. 20). However, despite the potential for increased engagement due to attitudes about political polarization, youth turnout remains low, reflecting a disconnect between motivation and actual participation (Khlosa, 2022, p. 5).

The increased popularity of political activity on social media has become crucial in shaping youth political activity. Yamiemily Hernandez mentions that “Accessing political content on a social networking site can be “more effective at motivating other potential voters and altering the political discourse” (2019, p. 8). Despite this, Hernandez acknowledges a critical gap, “The youth vote is an interesting bloc of the American political system because it appears that young citizens are passionate about social policy issues, yet do not hit the polls come election time” (2019, p. 4).

In conclusion, while political actors and parties have tried to court the youth vote for decades, there are substantial challenges in translating awareness of issues online to actual voter turnout. Both disillusionment with traditional party politics and societal attitudes contribute to increased youth apathy despite the rise of social media platforms that amplify political discourse. Bauml, Smith, and Blevens (2022) point out, “Youth as authentic actors in civic

projects...empowering them to ‘feel effective in their civic work’” (p. 4). Working to bridge the gap between online participation and meaningful youth participation will require parties and politicians to adopt strategies that authentically engage young voters, empowering them to see their role in shaping democratic outcomes.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Given the increasing concerns about dwindling voter turnout among young people, understanding how apathy influences young voters' (aged 18-29) engagement with the electoral process is critical to addressing this challenge. This research explores how apathy impacts vital aspects of elections, including turnout and comprehension of policy issues, particularly in the 2024 election. Young voters are heavily immersed in social media, with a significant percentage spending extended hours on these platforms daily. The prevalence of political content on social media is an essential factor shaping their engagement.

Based on this survey's results and the literature reviewed for this paper, the hypothesis asserts that apathy toward the political process stems from young voters' perceptions that their votes lack influence or that the political system is fundamentally broken. A combination of perceived systemic flaws and the overwhelming nature of political discourse, particularly on social media, has significantly contributed to this growing problem. This apathy contributes to lower turnout, diminished trust in electoral outcomes, and a focus on candidate likeability over substantive policy issues. These sentiments discourage participation and lead to reduced attention to essential components of the voting process, such as understanding candidate platforms.

More and more young people are identifying as Independent, representing a lack of confidence in the major political parties in the United States. Young voters no longer believe in the platforms the Democratic and Republican parties put out. They are paying less attention to the policy ideas and focusing more on the perceived celebrity and personality of the two candidates when casting their vote or simply not voting at all. This study examines the role of political apathy among young voters, emphasizing their increasing detachment from the

functions of American democracy. By exploring these patterns, the research seeks to understand how these sentiments shape participation in the 2024 election and beyond.

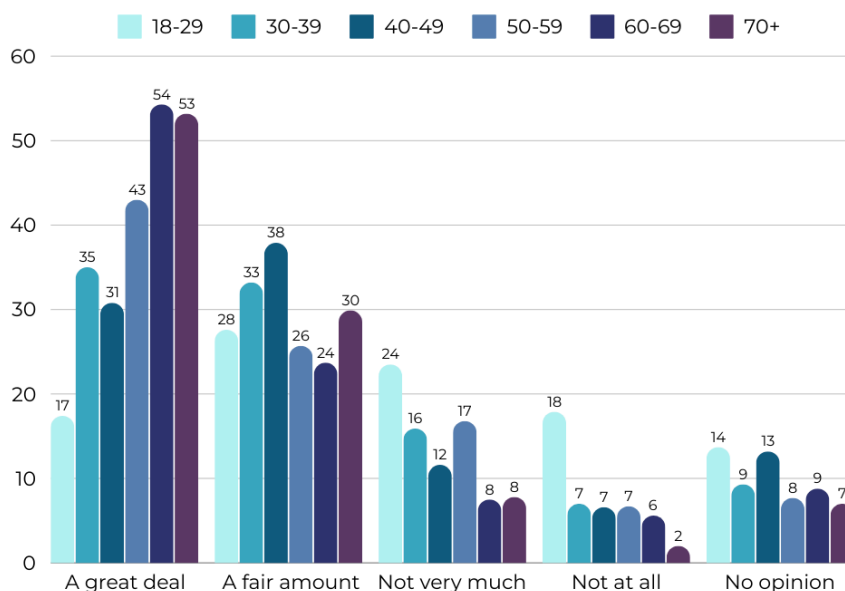
Methodology

This poll was conducted from November 19-20, 2024, with a sample size of 951 respondents. Respondents were contacted through an online panel provided by CINT. Given the sample size of $n=951$, the margin of error (MOE) was $\pm 3.10\%$. The data sets were weighted by age, gender, education level, race/ethnicity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), and party registration (NBC Exit Polls, 2024). It is important to remember that subsets based on party registration carry higher margins of error as the sample size is reduced.

Results

The survey conducted highlights notable trends among 18-29-year-olds, showcasing their distinct political perspectives and behaviors. Among 18-29-year-olds, 37% voted for Trump, while 25% supported Kamala Harris, and 25% did not vote, the highest non-voting rate across age groups by 7%. Additionally, 14% of 18-29-year-olds voted for “someone else,” the highest third-party voting rate by 7%. Social issues like abortion and LGBTQ rights mattered more to 37% of young voters than pocketbook concerns. Meanwhile, 36% prioritized candidate likeability—the highest among age groups, tied with 30-39—over issue stances, which only 64% deemed important, the lowest rate across age groups. Trust in the election results was low among

How much do you trust the results of the 2024 presidential election?



18-29-year-olds (see figure), with 17% expressing a great deal of trust (the lowest among age groups by 14 points), 24% saying “not very much,” and 18% saying “not at all,” the latter two being the highest

percentages among age groups.

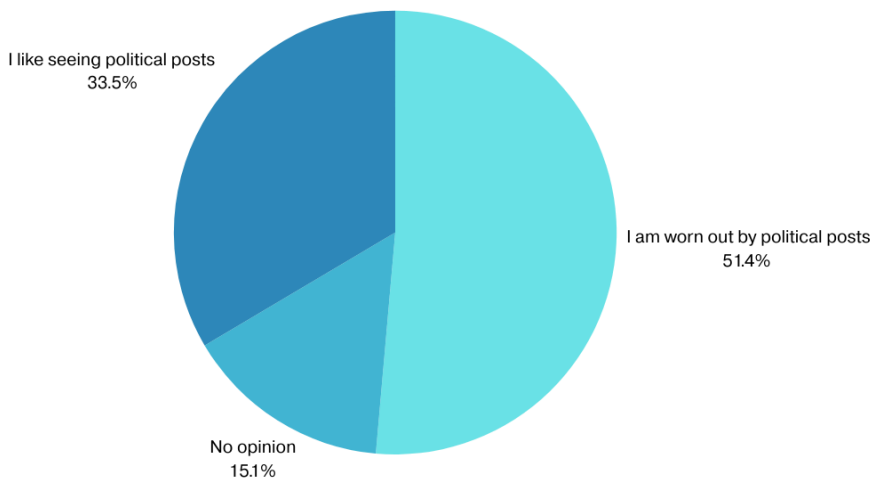
This generation demonstrated unique political sentiments, with 49% feeling neutral about the Democratic campaign and 41% about the Republican campaign, both being the highest levels

of neutrality across age groups. While 34% of 18-29 year-olds found the Republican Party out of touch and 24% found the Democratic Party out of touch, 22% believed both major parties were disconnected, contributing to 80% seeing one or both as out of touch. Notably, 31% thought neither party offered clear solutions, and 27% felt neither had their best interests in mind. Among those 18-29 who identified as Republican, 44% attributed their affiliation to opposition to the Democratic Party rather than support for Republican ideals, the highest rate among age groups by 17%

Social media usage also stands out, with 18-29-year-olds making up 36% of those who spend 7-8 hours daily on these platforms, 17% higher than any other option for social media

usage. A significant 51% of this age group felt worn out by the volume of political posts on social media, underscoring their digital fatigue. They represented 36% of voters choosing “someone else” and 28% of non-voters, the highest rates for these categories.

Thinking about the posts and discussions you see on social media about politics and the 2024 election, which comes closer to your view(18-29):



Analysis and Discussion

The survey data gathered reflects a nuanced perspective on young voters' political behaviors and attitudes(aged 18-29) in the 2024 presidential election, showcasing a generation growing weary of the political establishment. Young people spend the most time on social media, with 36% of those spending 7-8 hours on social media belonging to the 18-29 age group, the highest social media time usage category for young voters by 13 percentage points. While political discussions have become commonplace on social media, young voters are not responding to these messages, with 51% of 18-29-year-olds expressing being worn out by the volume of political content they encounter on their feeds. This weariness aligns with their general ambivalence towards major party campaigns, as nearly half (49%) felt "neutral" about the Democratic campaign. In comparison, 41% expressed similar feelings about the Republican campaign- the highest category among 18-29 year-olds by 21 points.

Young people also exhibited the highest rate of non-participation in the election, with nearly a quarter(25%) reporting that they did not vote in 2024. This disengagement is further reflected in their trust in electoral outcomes: only 17% expressed a "great deal" of trust in the 2024 election results, the lowest of any age group, while 18% stated they had no trust at all, the highest percentage across age groups. Combined with the result that 27% of 18-29-year-olds believe neither party has their best interests in mind. These figures suggest growing skepticism about institutional politics among young voters.

Another key implication of these findings is the non-ability of political campaigns to foster trust and authenticity among young voters. The fact that 36% of 18-29-year-olds prioritized candidate likeability more than any other age group underscores the importance of

relatability and personal connection in appealing to younger voters. However, the simultaneous prioritization of social values (37%) suggests that this generation is not merely disenchanted but actively seeking representation on cultural and moral issues. Campaigns that fail to address this dual need for relatability and meaningful advocacy risk alienating this critical portion of the electorate.

Additionally, a substantial portion of this age group is politically independent (39%); their views on both the Democratic and Republican parties reflect a deep sense of disconnection from partisan politics. A staggering 80% believe that either the Democratic or Republican Party, or both, are out of touch with the average voter. Additionally, 31% think neither party offers clear policies and solutions to America's problems, while 26% view neither as inherently pro-establishment. Young people are no longer aligning themselves with political parties and are drawn to politics in an issue-driven approach.

While the evidence is robust in illustrating generational trends, it is essential to evaluate the quality and limitations of the data. Relying on self-reported attitudes introduces potential biases, such as social desirability or recall bias, which could affect the accuracy of responses. Moreover, the lack of contextual information about respondents' experiences or geographic distribution limits the generalization of findings across the 18 to 29-year-old population. For example, younger voters' engagement with social issues might vary significantly depending on their local political climate or socioeconomic background.

In conclusion, the results offer valuable insight into the political behaviors of 18 to 29-year-olds. They reveal a generation that is critical of existing systems but deeply engaged with issues that resonate personally. The findings emphasize the need for campaigns and

institutions to adapt to this evolving landscape by prioritizing authenticity, trust-building, and issue-driven representation.

Limitations

The findings are tied to the temporal context of the 2024 election, which may not fully represent long-term trends or broader electoral behaviors. While the survey focused on voter attitudes, it may have overlooked critical factors such as misinformation, barriers to voter registration, or the nuanced impacts of local versus national politics. Non-registered voters were also removed, leaving gaps in understanding the barriers to participation and their views on the democratic process. Additionally, the survey briefly addressed social media's role but did not explore that topic in depth. The lack of longitudinal data limits the ability to track how attitudes evolve, and the absence of qualitative follow-ups, such as interviews or focus groups, restricts the contextual understanding of the motivations behind respondents' answers. Addressing these limitations in future research would enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

Future Research

The results of this survey highlight a pattern of apathy towards the democratic process and the major political parties from young voters(aged 18-29) within the context of the 2024 election. The findings indicate a perceived lack of faith in the systems of democracy and an overwhelming idea that major political parties are out of touch with the average American voter. This apathy demonstrates a shift in focus from policy comprehension to candidate likeability and personality, weakening the substantive foundation of electoral participation among young voters.

Going forward, if anyone chooses to survey on this topic, it would be beneficial to survey young voters in smaller clusters of age groups(18-21, 22-25, 26-29) to get a clear picture of the way these attitudes transition from college-age voters, to post-graduate and early adulthood. Focusing closely on non-voters, asking them if they have never voted in a national election or the last election they voted in, and providing options for non-voters to explain why they did not vote would expand the findings on this topic. The media use trends in the survey provided interesting results, and focusing closely on what platforms are most used among these voters and where they receive and trust news from would result in more specific data.

Suggested research questions include: How do attitudes toward democracy and political parties differ among young voters across smaller age clusters (18–21, 22–25, 26–29)? What are the primary reasons non-voters within the 18–29 age range choose not to participate in national elections, and how do these reasons vary by age group? Which social media platforms are most trusted by young voters for political information, and how does this trust influence their engagement with the electoral process? What types of political engagement, events, or causes resonate most with young voters and motivate them to participate in elections? How does the

shift from college-age to early adulthood influence young voters' perceptions of the political system and their likelihood of voting?

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