

**DON'T
SCROLL**

PAST

GEN-Z

**HOW TO HARNESS
THIS GENERATION'S
POLITICAL IMPACT**



Young Americans haven't always shown up when it counts.

Historically, the youth voting block has trailed all others when it comes to voter participation, so it makes sense political campaigns and elected officials haven't spent much time considering their vote. But this year, things are different, and the circumstances of this election are unique. Data suggests that Gen Z — those born in 1996 or later, and many of whom will be eligible to vote in their first presidential election this year — will show up to vote like never before in 2020. They're building off momentum from the 2018 midterms and have been stirred by a global pandemic. Plus, campaigns have had to increasingly shift voter outreach online — a place where Gen Zers already spend a lot of their time.

Gen Z are passionate about their community, country, and society, because the issues affecting the election this year are closer to home than ever. This generation grew up during the financial crisis and has had to face school shootings, climate change, racial inequality, and the most devastating pandemic in a century. In fact, **82% of Gen Zers say this pandemic has made them realize how their political leaders' decisions impact our everyday lives**¹. And they are experiencing all of this through their phones.

The momentum for voter turnout is gaining

among Gen Zers. Twenty-three million young people ages 18 to 23 are eligible to vote in the upcoming presidential election — many for the first time. But challenges still remain in helping them show up to the polls. While this generation is more likely than older adults to have signed petitions or had uncomfortable conversations with friends about tough topics², they're far less familiar with the systems still governing elections today. And for young first-time voters — who typically learn about voting on college campuses, or don't attend college and therefore lack access to the same level of civic education — reaching them where they are is more important and more challenging than ever. Civic engagement simply has not caught up with the way this generation experiences the social causes that matter most to them — through their phones.

In this white paper, we explore the barriers keeping Gen Z from voting, the issues that matter most to them, and the best ways to reach this influential generation. Our conclusions are informed by proprietary quantitative data from CIRCLE and The Morning Consult, along with new qualitative research among bipartisan Gen Z voters and experts working closely with Gen Z communities, conducted by Crowd DNA in summer 2020 leading up to the November election.

TL; DR? Gen Z might just surprise everyone this election.

¹ CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.

² CIRCLE's analysis of the Bureau Of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey March Basic Supplement, 2020.

Gen Z by the numbers

23 million

young people aged 18 to 23 are eligible to vote³



85% of Gen Zers believe young people have the power to change things in this country⁴



82% of Gen Zers say this pandemic made them realize that political leaders' decisions impact the everyday lives of people⁵



63% of students aged 18 to 21 learned about civic processes while attending college⁶



Only one-third of 18 to 23-year-olds are able to attend college full time⁷

³ CIRCLE's analysis of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey March Basic Supplement, 2020.
⁴ CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.
⁵ CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.
⁶ CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.
⁷ CIRCLE's analysis of the Census Bureau Current Population Survey March 2020 Basic Supplement.

Gen Z's Rising Political Power

• **23 million young people** aged 18 to 23 are eligible to participate in the 2020 presidential election.⁸

Historically, young people have turned out in lower numbers than older generations. There are a number of factors behind this: voting systems and processes that haven't been built for them, confusing and unclear laws, lack of civic education and campaign outreach — all that, plus a perceived generational apathy. But recent election cycles show young voters are beginning to buck these trends, and 2020 may prove to be an inflection point in youth voter turnout.

In the 2016 presidential election, only 9.6 million — or 42% — of 18 to 23-year-olds eligible to vote actually cast a ballot⁹. In that cycle, we saw tighter races in states where youth voter participation was higher, implying that an increase in the youth vote really does count.

• **In the 2018 midterms, we saw a surge in youth voting — turnout suddenly increased to 32% after decades of stagnation in midterm cycles (compared to 17% in 2014).**¹⁰

In the 2018 midterm election, overall US

voter turnout rates increased significantly, with participation rising to 41% among millennials, 54% among Gen Xers, and 64% among baby boomers. In contrast, in 2014, voter turnout for each generation was 22%, 39%, and 52%, respectively,¹¹ meaning young voters almost doubled their participation between 2014 and 2018 — by far the greatest increase of any age group.

Looking specifically at 18 to 23-year-old voters, that trend holds: in 2018, 32% voted, up from 17% in 2014.¹²

In the upcoming 2020 election, 23 million young people aged 18 to 23 are eligible to participate, and many of them are casting a ballot for the first time. In fact, over 15 million people have turned 18 since the last presidential election.

If this year's numbers mirror those of the 2018 midterms, we'll see record-breaking participation from Gen Z in 2020 — a youth turnout like never before.

What's driving this upsurge? Across every young person we spoke to for this research — and across all their differing political ideologies — we discovered two root causes.

8 CIRCLE's analysis of the Bureau Of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey March Basic Supplement, 2020.

9 CIRCLE's analysis of the Bureau Of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey March Basic Supplement, 2016.

10 CIRCLE analysis of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement 2014 and 2018.

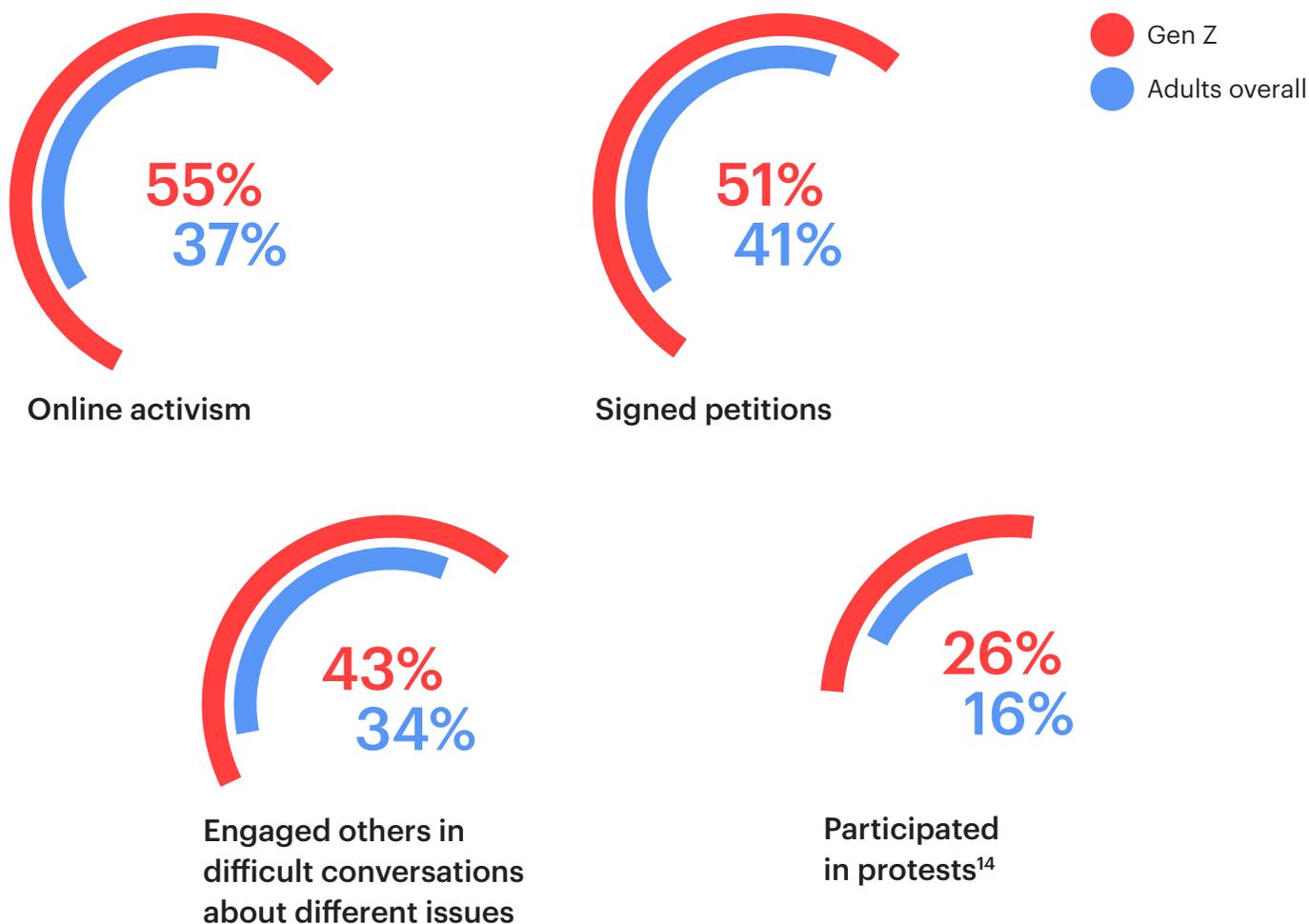
11 CIRCLE analysis of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement 2014 and 2018.

12 CIRCLE analysis of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement 2014 and 2018.

Firstly, Gen Z is an action-oriented generation. They're used to using digital platforms and creative tools to express themselves, including advocating for and participating in efforts for social change. While protestors are often portrayed in the media as being one-sided on important issues, young people who identify as both conservative and liberal consider themselves activists advocating for change.

The second reason Gen Zers are voting more? They care deeply about issues impacting their daily lives and local communities, but don't feel their concerns are represented by national-level politicians or government — and COVID-19 has only intensified this feeling. An overwhelming majority of 18 to 29-year-olds say the pandemic has made them realize politicians' decisions impact their everyday lives.¹³

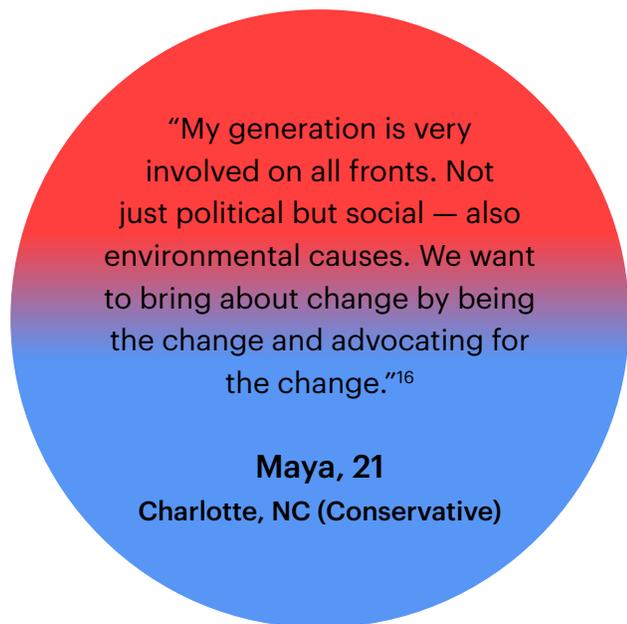
Let's dive deeper into the data. Across the political spectrum, **Gen Zers are more likely to have taken the following actions** (vs. adults overall):



¹³ Crowd DNA qualitative interviews with 4 x Gen Z experts, August 2020.

¹⁴ Morning Consult Survey (August 2020): What type of action(s) have you taken? (Base: Gen Z, n. 224).

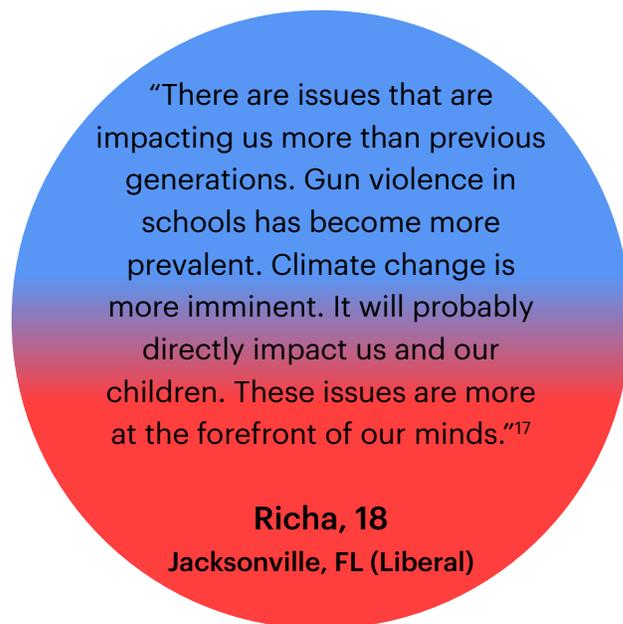
We're seeing that Gen Zers are eager to speak out about their beliefs in ways older generations generally do not. In fact, members of Gen Z are more likely to consider themselves "activists" than millennials were at their age.¹⁵



As the first generation to grow up with constant access to digital communication and entertainment platforms, Gen Z is unique. They use these platforms to communicate with each other, pass the time, and access information. It should come as no surprise that 66% of Gen Zers use social and video apps to get news about politics.¹⁸

Young people are also producing more content than ever before as a form of self-expression — and activism. **Over 60% of 18 to 23-year-olds say they feel more represented through creating media and content about politics or social issues.**¹⁹

Online platforms give Gen Zers an outlet for the content they create, and being active on them gives these young people a voice, empowering a generation. Many of the Gen Zers we spoke to explained they've used these platforms to participate in activism. It's how they can express themselves, particularly by organizing and connecting with others who are similarly passionate about certain beliefs, sharing and signing petitions demanding action. Plus, by connecting through these platforms, they're able to feel part of a bigger collective movement.



Online communication platforms also work as an equalizer between politicians and citizens. Seeing real content from candidates can make them seem more accessible. By meeting Gen Zers where they are, candidates are able to share more about their policies in a credible setting.

15 CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020, compared to CIRCLE/Tisch College 2016 and 2018 youth survey in which Millennials were surveyed

16 Crowd DNA qualitative interviews with 8 x Gen Z participants, August 2020.

17 Crowd DNA qualitative interviews with 8 x Gen Z participants, August 2020.

18 Morning Consult Survey (August 2020): From which of these sources do you get news about politics? (Base: Gen Z, n. 346).

19 CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.

79% of Gen Zers agree: “I believe that I have a personal responsibility to create the change I want to see in the world.”²⁰

Despite the rise in youth activism, media commentary tends to diminish the potential of their vote, assuming all of this passion and energy ultimately falls short of pushing young people to the polls. The argument says that youth voters feel so misrepresented and angry about the unfairness of the system — and their perceived ineffectiveness of the government — that they reject voting altogether. This just isn't true!

A recent study conducted by Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Abby Kiesa at CIRCLE found that when young people are involved in activism, their cynicism about politics and lack of trust in democratic systems do not discourage them from voting — rather, these feelings of dissatisfaction with status quo move them to vote.²¹

Gen Zers are more likely than all other generations to feel compelled to vote because they care about their community (one in five selected this as the reason that most compels them to vote).²²

Interestingly, Gen Zers find it easier to connect with local politics rather than national, taking an interest in fields such

as city planning. Why? These topics aren't typically viewed as politics but instead as “issues.” The goals are clearer and quite literally closer to home, so it's easier to get behind the idea of reforming a justice system, creating affordable housing units, or expanding local parks and recreation programs when specific to a neighborhood, district, or state. And even if a local candidate is significantly older than Gen Zers, they're still easier to relate to. Living in the same community offers stronger opportunities to find common ground.

We know involvement in activism motivates young people to vote. We also know that current events, especially the pandemic, are providing clear, tangible examples of how political decisions can have local consequences. Considering all of these facts, it's easy to see why there may be record-breaking turnout from Gen Z this election.



20 2020 GroupSolver US study commissioned by Snap Inc.

21 Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. & Kiesa, A.I. (2019). “Getting Young People to Vote: Seven Tips for the Classroom.” *Social Education*, 83(4), 194-199.

22 Morning Consult Survey (August 2020): People vote for many reasons. From the list below, which one reason most compels you to vote? (Base: Gen Z, n. 207).

23 Crowd DNA qualitative interviews with 4 x Gen Z experts, August 2020.

Overcoming Voting Barriers in 2020

Despite this momentum, significant barriers persist that threaten Gen Zers' access to voting this election cycle. For starters, our voting systems have largely been designed with older demographics in mind. Gen Z is a mobile-first generation, and the voting process simply hasn't been modernized for the way they communicate and consume information.

Plus, because of historical voting patterns, the larger political ecosystem generally hasn't prioritized understanding and reaching first-time and youth voters where they are. There are exceptions, of course, but many political campaigns, civic-education efforts, and even political polling and research organizations treat Gen Zers like an afterthought. For example, some political polls that survey registered voters don't include newly registered voters in their sample sets — which means young people are more likely to be left out of the equation.

Moreover, the tools that currently exist to help educate first-time and youth voters largely favor those with socioeconomic privilege. Over 20% of 18 to 23-year-olds previously reported getting information about elections and voting from teachers,

classmates, or at school,²⁴ through groups that push on-campus registration and professors who share critical voting information.

All of these dynamics are significantly exacerbated by the logistical challenges and consequences posed by COVID-19.

- **More than a third** of 18 to 21-year-olds said they didn't know if online voter registration was available in their state.²⁵

Only 21% of Gen Zers (compared to 27% of millennials) have voted by mail at least once, and though 65% have seen information regarding voting by mail, 35% haven't seen any information at all.²⁶ **More than 27% of 18 to 21-year-olds say they don't know where to find information about mail-in voting.**²⁷

- **Only 36% of 18 to 23-year-olds** are enrolled in college full time, which means nearly two-thirds don't have the same civic and political engagement opportunities.²⁸

Full-time college students are more likely

24 CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.

25 CIRCLE/Tisch College, Growing Voters: A Profile of the Youngest Eligible Voters in 2020, July 2020.

26 CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.

27 CIRCLE/Tisch College, Growing Voters: A Profile of the Youngest Eligible Voters in 2020, July 2020.

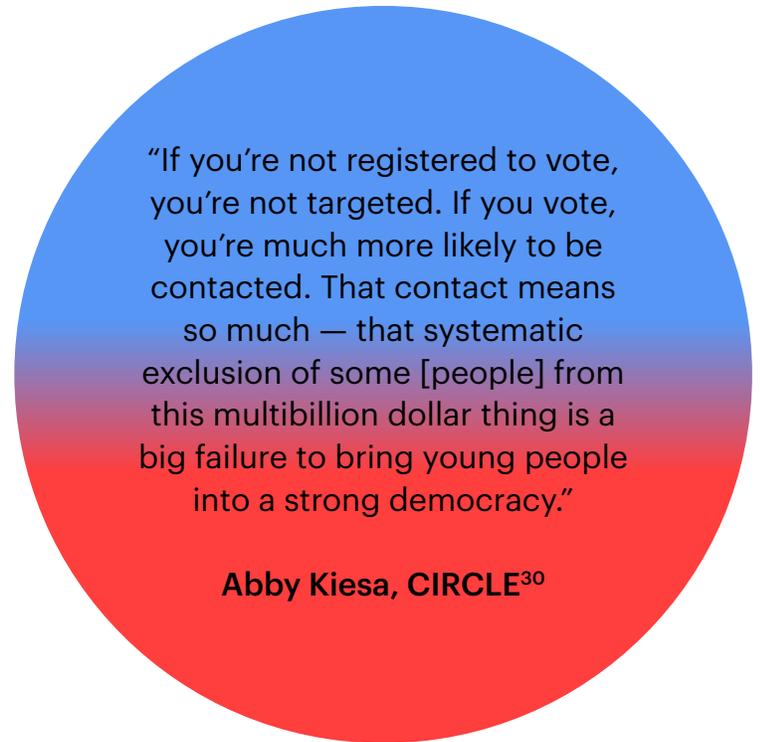
28 CIRCLE's analysis of the Census Current Population Survey March 2020 data. CIRCLE's 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020, showed that 35% of the sample said they were enrolled full time at a college..

to be engaged in activism than those not enrolled in college (68% vs. 56%). A vast majority believe they have the power to change things in this country (94%) and to hear from peers about civic and political engagement (78%). So the next question, inevitably, is how to empower Gen Zers who aren't in college full time.²⁹

About one-third of 18 to 23-year-olds are full-time college students. Others are studying part time, still in high school, working or looking for work, and some have already graduated from college, but the disparity in civic and political opportunities between full-time college students and other young people is still worrisome. Being able to attend college full-time is a privilege not afforded to all.

This disparity in civic and political opportunity isn't just about being college educated — education alone isn't enhancing voter turnout. Being surrounded by and learning from peers with different life experiences as well as increased access to activist movements can be a motivating factor to vote.

Another reason for lack of engagement stems from the fact that many young people may not have anyone actively discussing politics with them. It's a failure that extends all the way from the family home and friend groups to political outreach. Campaigns tend to exclude young voters in outreach and messaging, often because they aren't registered to



vote or have yet to align with a particular party.

- **Over 50%** of Gen Zers get information about voting and elections from their parents.³¹

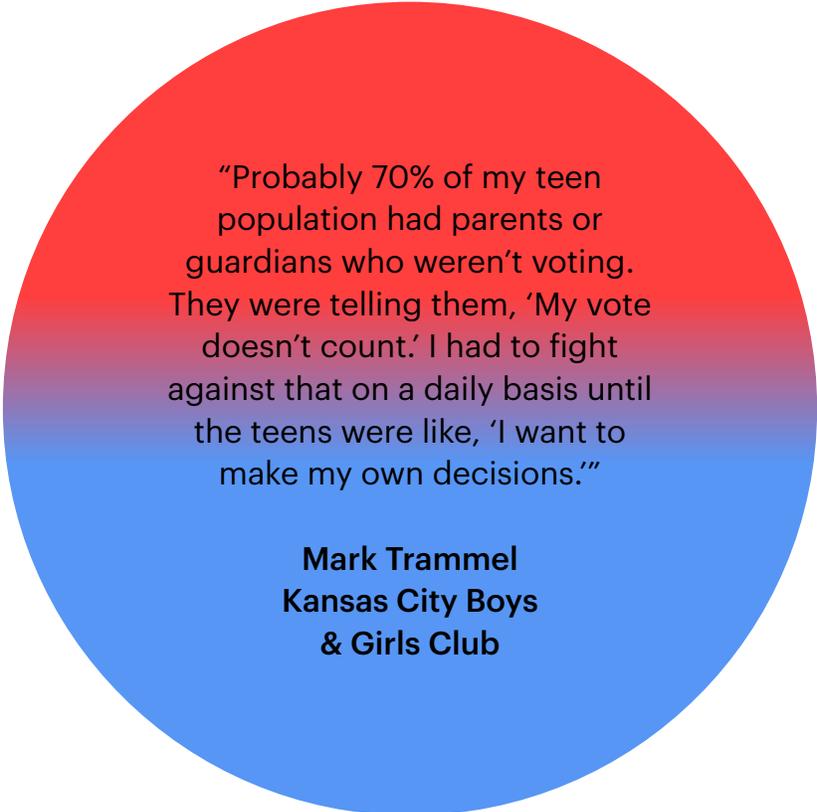
For many Gen Zers, guidance from their parents can be a key source of information about voting and elections — or at the very least, an excellent starting point. But underrepresented young voters are more likely to have non-participating parents, and this can present a huge barrier to getting the knowledge they need to vote. It can even get in the way of simply feeling encouraged to vote. And while every majority racial and ethnic group

²⁹ CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.
³⁰ Crowd DNA qualitative interviews with 4 x Gen Z experts, August 2020.
³¹ CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, fielded May 20–June 18, 2020.

saw historic increases in voter turnout in 2018, the rate of participation remained significantly lower for minorities: Black voter turnout was 51.5%, compared to 57.5% for white voters, and for Hispanic/Latinx and Asian Americans, turnout was even lower, at just 40%.

However, when empowered through other sources, like community outreach or civic-engagement initiatives, these barriers are reduced for young minority voters. This way, young people feel a sense of responsibility to encourage not only their peers to vote but — in a major role reversal — their parents, too.

As schools continue to grapple with the challenges posed by COVID-19, young voters are making difficult decisions — should they move to another state to attend college in person, stay home and continue with remote learning, or even move into college housing but attend classes remotely? Because of continued unpredictability around the pandemic, young people are likely to continue facing added logistical challenges around voting this election cycle, whether by mail or in person.



“Probably 70% of my teen population had parents or guardians who weren’t voting. They were telling them, ‘My vote doesn’t count.’ I had to fight against that on a daily basis until the teens were like, ‘I want to make my own decisions.’”

Mark Trammel
Kansas City Boys
& Girls Club

How to Tap Into Gen Z's Political Power

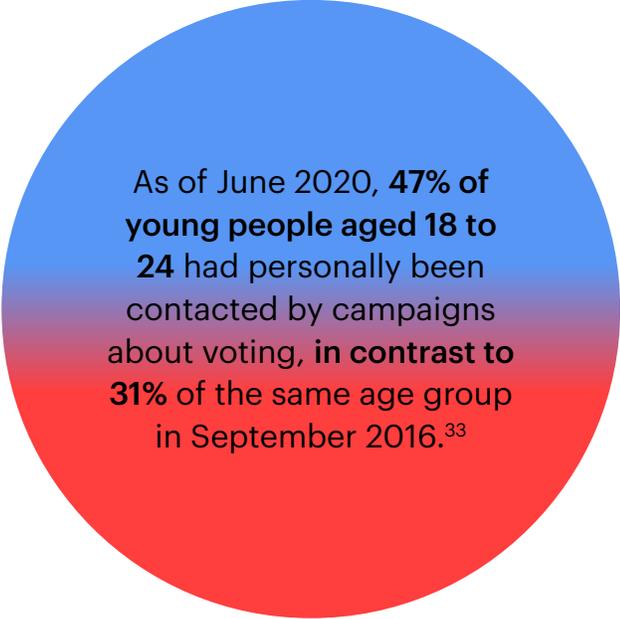
We've seen how, despite their determination and drive, Gen Zers are often left out of conversations that matter most. Whether due to lack of access to education around voting, seemingly disinterested candidates and campaigns, hard-to-find information, or civically disengaged parents, the odds are stacked against these young people. But we've seen that Gen Z is simply unwilling to accept this as their reality.

Now it's up to campaigns, organizations, and brands to harness the power of Gen Z. We're seeing signs that campaign outreach is moving in the right direction.

Mobile civic tools can play a pivotal role for young people in this election by providing resources to educate young voters, help them register, provide a sample ballot, and ensure they understand their voting options, whether by mail or in person. Given most students aren't on college campuses — particularly this year — where they have easy access to information, digital tools can serve as an equalizer in providing civic and political information to young Americans across the country.

It's time to finally connect with Gen Z, provide the resources they need, encourage them to share those resources with friends and family, get them to the polls, and, ultimately, help them achieve the representation they deserve.

2020 might be the year that we see historic youth voter turnout.



As of June 2020, **47%** of young people aged 18 to 24 had personally been contacted by campaigns about voting, **in contrast to 31%** of the same age group in September 2016.³³

33 CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey fielded May 20–June 18, 2020, as compared to CIRCLE Youth Survey 2016.

Methodology

CIRCLE provided Snap Inc. with proprietary analysis of their exclusive poll on young adults from the first wave of the CIRCLE/Tisch College 2020 Youth Survey, which was fielded from May 20 to June 18, 2020. The survey covered adults between the ages of 18 and 29 who will be eligible to vote in the United States by the 2020 general election.

This white paper was also supported by data from **The Morning Consult**. This poll was conducted between August 5 and 9, 2020, among a national sample of 2,200 adults, plus an oversample of 500 daily Snapchat users. The interviews were conducted online, and the national sample data were weighted to approximate a target sample of adults based on age, gender, educational attainment, race, and region. Results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points.

Lastly, we partnered with **Crowd DNA** to recruit and engage 16 Gen Z participants, speaking to young people across the political spectrum: activists, apathetics, liberals, conservatives, independents, and undecideds. We asked them questions about civic engagement in America today, including the causes that matter most to them, when and how they've gotten involved in activist movements, their voting intentions, political preferences and, of course, the impact of all things 2020 on the above. We focused on Gen Zers living in cities in the spotlight this year: Charlotte, Columbus, Jacksonville, Miami, Milwaukee, and Portland.

Four experts on youth engagement helped us interpret the data in a more holistic sense, highlighting broader demographic trends. Critically, as individuals leading initiatives and organizations that encourage civic engagement, we were able to learn more about optimal routes to connect with Gen Z and to inspire them to take action.

Special thanks to:

Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Ph.D. – Director, CIRCLE

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Megan Brandon – Regional Program Manager, Generation Citizen

Mark Trammel – Teen Services Director, Kansas City Boys & Girls Club