



IDEAS

# Generation Z Doesn't Remember When America Worked

Young Americans face a dire economy—and steep odds against political change.

By Annie Lowrey



Nyimas Laula / The New York Times / Getty

AUGUST 14, 2022, 6:30 AM ET

SHARE ▾

---

*About the author:* Annie Lowrey is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

“**F**RUSTRATING” WAS ONE word a young progressive activist named Annie Wu Henry used to describe today’s Democratic establishment.

In her mind, Wu told me in an interview, Democrats were falling short in terms of addressing the country’s affordability crisis, eliminating student debt, protecting the rights of immigrants and LGBTQ Americans, and ensuring access to abortion. Worse, she said, they seemed to have no viable strategy for accomplishing what they promised, let alone what the country needed. “We tell them our ideas, and they tell us their plans,” Wu said, talking about the strategic differences she saw between the left and the right. “While we can be very upset that the Court overturned *Roe*, nobody should be surprised. The right has been talking about this for decades, as well as telling us how they are going to do it.”

In her frustration with the Democrats, Wu, a 26-year-old Pennsylvanian who works as a digital and communications strategist for progressive organizations and campaigns, is hardly alone. Young voters are not just more liberal than any other age cohort; they are more liberal than any other cohort of young people has been in half a century. But these voters have soured on the Democrats, stoking fears within the party that low turnout among them might help Republicans retake the House and the Senate this fall: Joe Biden’s approval rating has plummeted 20 points among Gen Zers and Millennials in the past year.

After a brutal spring and early summer—consumer sentiment hit an all-time low in June—conditions are starting to improve for Biden. The administration has finally killed the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Gas prices are finally dropping. Congress finally passed marquee climate-change legislation.

Read: The real reason young adults seem slow to ‘grow up’

Will that be enough to mollify the country's youngest voters? Gen Z's concerns seem to go beyond those gripping everyone in recent months. A generation turning to the left is colliding with a political system ever more structurally biased to the right. And a generation that wants the government to play an active role in improving people's lives is confronting the fact that Washington has become less capable of getting anything done. Maybe young voters' mood will improve in the coming weeks. But do Democrats have any hope of delivering what they want in the long term?

**Y**OUNG VOTERS THEMSELVES do not seem convinced. Biden's approval rating has dipped three times more among members of Gen Z than among Boomers. A recent poll from *The New York Times* and Siena College found that just one in 100 young people strongly approved of the president's job performance, and 94 in 100 young Democrats believed someone else should run in 2024. (Among voters over age 64, by contrast, 22 percent strongly approved of Biden's performance, and 42 percent of Democrats in this age group wanted the party to nominate a different candidate.) Moreover, in a Harvard poll conducted this spring, one in three young people said that "political involvement rarely has tangible results," and two in five believed their vote "doesn't make a difference."

## RECOMMENDED READING

---

Live Like the Ancient Cynics

ARTHUR C. BROOKS

---

How People Came to Believe Blueberries Are the Healthiest Fruit

JAMES HAMBLIN

---

How Individual Actions Affect Economic Inequality

JOE PINSKER

---

Over the past few weeks, I spoke with a number of political analysts and pollsters, as well as politically engaged young activists, to try to understand why the younger voters—and young progressives in particular—have been feeling so down.

Those conversations pointed to three factors: First, young voters of all political persuasions are experiencing the same inflation-driven economic malaise that older voters are experiencing, but to a greater degree. Indeed, younger Americans tend to have lower incomes than older Americans; an average young adult earns half what an average person in their late 40s earns. That makes today's brutal cost increases harder for young people to manage without cutting back on essentials. On top of that, younger people are much less likely to have any kind of financial cushion in the form of savings, retirement accounts, or home equity than older people; wealth is even more correlated with age than income is.

Worse still, young people are getting hit with *bigger* cost increases than their older counterparts. Folks in their 20s and 30s are much more likely to be renters than people in their 40s or older are, making them more likely to be exposed to obscene rent hikes, for instance. On the whole, people under 25 are experiencing annual rates of inflation a percentage point higher than people over 65, analysts at Wells Fargo found. (One subheading in that report: "Once again, Boomers come out ahead.")

Derek Thompson: Why the old elite spend so much time at work

The current inflation crisis follows a pandemic-induced recession, which ended a sluggish, unequal expansion, which came after the worst recession since the Great Depression. Today's young adults "are the first generation in American history to be worse off than their parents," said Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, the executive director of NextGen America, a youth voting-rights organization. "The economy we have was

not built for us. You look at the rates of homeownership among young adults. You look at their debt ratios. It's not a bright future, and it's young people's No. 1 concern."

Second, young people have specific political concerns, and the Democratic Party's gerontocratic leadership has made little or no progress on any number of them. Student-loan debt, for instance: More than half of recent college graduates have taken out loans to finance their education, saddling them with an average of nearly \$30,000 in debt. The Biden administration has toyed with eliminating some or all of that debt since the 2020 campaign, generating thousands of headlines and getting millions of people's hopes up. Yet as of now, the White House has not committed to broad debt relief. "They've somehow managed to get two years of bad press about it," said Marcela Mulholland, the political director at Data for Progress, a left-of-center polling outfit, "despite not doing anything."

On some issues of particular importance to young progressive voters, there has been not just no progress, but a reversal of progress. Young folks are much, much more likely than their older counterparts to identify as LGBTQ (Gen Zers are roughly twice as likely as Millennials, who are twice as likely as Gen Xers, who are twice as likely as Boomers). They are also more likely to support strengthening legal protections for LGBTQ people. Yet state lawmakers have filed hundreds of discriminatory bills in the past few years, limiting the health-care options of transgender youth and forcing them out of athletic competitions.

**T**HERE'S A THIRD reason so many politically engaged young lefties feel disaffected: These young people have come of age in a time of rising populism, declining democracy, climate catastrophe, and vicious inequality. "This is a cohort that has never felt stable or secure, personally, financially, or physically," John Della Volpe, the director of polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, told me. "They don't have a moment where they felt great to be an American, or when America was truly united." These voters aren't old enough to recall the surge of patriotism after 9/11, he noted; some don't even remember Barack Obama's election. But their feeling of vulnerability has made the youngest American adults

much more likely than older voters to agree that the government should, and indeed needs to, solve the country's problems.

Yet Biden and a Democratic Congress have failed to deliver on many of their promises. The Republican-dominated Supreme Court now looks set to gut the administrative state and wind back any number of laws and rights, and will likely keep doing so for decades. Conservatives, through techniques such as gerrymandering, have tilted state legislatures and Congress to the right. The problems are getting more and more pressing, and the government is getting less and less capable, in the eyes of many young progressives I spoke with (a point on which many political scientists, historians, and politicians concur). “The country's broken, held together with McKinsey slide decks and duct tape,” Beatrice Adler-Bolton, a co-host of the podcast *Death Panel*, told me.

The youngest Americans will bear the worst consequences of our warming world and our government, which gives disproportionate power to older people in conservative states. And young progressives might not get their say in Washington for a long time, if ever. “On abortion access or raising the minimum wage or gun safety, we have seen the inability of our legislators to enact the policies that the vast majority of Americans support,” Tzintzún Ramirez, of NextGen, said. “Now we have an extreme right-wing Court that is making decisions over the health and the lives of millions of people, with next to no accountability.”

No wonder so many young voters believe their vote does not matter and have no confidence the country will turn itself around. That sentiment—perhaps even more so than young voters' disapproval of the current crop of Democratic leaders—poses great risk for the many liberal candidates who rely on young votes. “The question is, is it possible for this generation to hold two seemingly disparate views at the same time: Politics is unable to meet the moment, but it's still worth voting?” Della Volpe, of Harvard, said.

[Annie Lowrey: Millennials don't stand a chance](#)