Gen Z is more conservative than many realize — but the Instagram-fluent generation will revolutionize the right

By Kate Taylor

- **As Generation Z reaches voting age, American politics is set to evolve based on their demands.**
- **Instagram and social media play a massive role in how Gen Z gets their political news, in many ways mirroring the cable-news divisions of older generations.**
- **Gen Z is united on some topics that have typically divided the US, including climate change, legalizing marijuana, and social issues.**
- **But in Business Insider's survey of more than 1,800 people between the ages of 13 to 21, the majority did not identify as either conservative or liberal.**

In 2018, students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, watched a gunman murder 17 of their classmates. The teenagers mobilized.

"Every single person up here today, all these people should be home grieving," Emma Gonzales, then 18, said at a rally after the shooting. "But instead we are up here standing together, because if all our government and president can do is send thoughts and prayers, then it's time for victims to be the change that we need to see."

Over the past year, the Parkland teens have helped organize one of the largest youth protests since the Vietnam War. They created a #NeverAgain movement on social media, confronting politicians and organizing rallies, protests, and marches. And they're turning up at the polls in numbers.

Midterm youth-voter turnout was up 47% in 2018 from 2014, according to estimates from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, or Circle.

"Someone else may be in power, but this country belongs to them," Stephen Colbert said on his late-night show.

It is tempting to see the teens and young 20-somethings of Generation Z as a united, progressive force, rising up to challenge a divided country. The reality is more complicated.

While Gen Z is united on some issues, including climate change and legalizing marijuana, political rifts remain.

Social media, including Instagram, one of the most popular places for Gen Z to get political news, is helping deepen and amplify these divisions, sparking concerns in some young Americans that the country is simply entering a new era of political strife.

346 Likes
mary__hanbury
12 MINUTES AGO
samanthalee
Queens, New York
samuel_leigh
Bay City, Michigan
99 Likes
samuel_leigh
3 MINUTES AGO
200 Likes
hollisjohnson
12 MINUTES AGO
skyegould
New York, New York
shayanne_gal
Los Angeles, California
100 Likes
shayanne_gal
3 MINUTES AGO

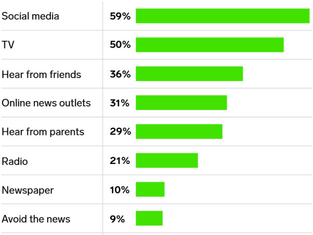
Instagram is front-page news

One of the biggest differences about Gen Z, according to experts and members of the generation, is the role social media plays in shaping beliefs.

Social media is the top way Gen Z finds out about news, with 59% of respondents listing it as a top news source in Business Insider's poll of more than 1,800 people between the ages of 13 and 21. The national poll was conducted with SurveyMonkey Audience partner Cint on behalf of Business Insider. It ran January 11-14.

More than half the people surveyed said they checked Snap, YouTube, or Instagram daily.

How Gen Z finds out what's going on in the world



Source: Business Insider

Parkland survivors, for example, organized and amplified their message on social media. Gonzales has more than 1.6 million followers on Twitter, while a Twitter campaign by Parkland survivor David Hogg helped persuade more than a dozen advertisers to slash ties with Laura Ingraham's Fox News show.

But for most Gen Zers, Instagram, not Twitter, reigns supreme. About 65% of respondents said they checked it daily, with many Gen Zers citing it as a major source for political news specifically.

Matt McClain/The Washington Post via Getty Images

While Instagram provides an easy way to get political headlines, it can condense the news into polarizing memes. Instagram accounts, such as conservative americans, republican.s, and stump_president_trump, tend to represent a single political point of view, often mocking the other side. More bombastic posts get the most reactions, helping perpetuate the division.

"Social media has the ability to take out a snippet of an entire presidential speech that somebody gave and give you 30 seconds to two minutes that can completely sway somebody's opinion on that candidate," Katy Foster, 21, a right-leaning college student in South Dakota, said.

"There's no time for most people in Generation Z," she added. "You're just being so caught up with everything. Especially being a college student, I don't have time to watch an hour-long debate. I will be swayed, honestly, by a two-minute video, which is sad to say."

Almost universal agreement on legal weed and climate change

Some issues have united Gen Z to a degree that transcends the norms of older generations.

Some 54% of Gen Zers believe the Earth is getting warmer because of human activity, according to a report from Pew Research Center, a similar proportion of millennials who believe climate change is caused by people's actions.

And among Republicans of all ages, Gen Z stands out.

"Gen Z Republicans are much more likely than Republicans in older generations to say government should do more to solve problems, and they're less likely to attribute the Earth's warming temperatures to natural patterns, as opposed to human activity," Kim Parker, Pew's director of social-trends research, told Business Insider.

Only 18% of Gen Zers polled who identified as Republicans said they believe the Earth is warming because of natural patterns, compared to 30% of millennial, 36% of Gen Z, and 42% of baby-boomer Republicans.

Hollis Johnson/Business Insider

"We see younger generations being more concerned, and part of it is a realization that they're going to have to inherit a lot of the decisions," Melissa Deckman, a political science professor at Washington College, said. "So I think you see more priority among younger generations to say, look, we're growing up in a world that's a lot less stable when it comes to the planet."

Legal marijuana similarly brings together Gen Zers on the left and right, according to Kyle Lelli, general manager at the debate and polling site Tylt, who says that roughly 70% to 80% of the generation supports legalized weed, according to the service's polls.

Harbor School
Millennium
School of the Future
TRUST
TYWLS
Brooklyn Latin
John Adams
LaGuardia
Urban Assembly Maker Academy
Beacon
Eleanor Roosevelt
Stuyvesant
Nest
TEENS
Brooklyn Tech
Bronx Science
New School
Murray Bergtraum
Bard
Museum School
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Erik McGregor/Pacific Press Light via Getty Images

The most diverse generation

Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in

America, with just 52% of 6- to 21-year-olds identifying as non-Hispanic whites, according to Pew. They're also more diverse in terms of understanding gender, with 35% saying they know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns, substantially more than any other generation.

According to Pew, 62% of Gen Z sees diversity as good for society, in line with the millennial generation and significantly higher than Gen X (52%), boomer (48%), and silent (42%). Some 59% believe forms should include options other than "man" or "woman," significantly more than the 50% of millennials who believe the same.

"One thing that's distinctive about Gen Z is they are the most diverse generation yet, and most comfortable with changing cultural norms around things like gender identity," Will Jordan, a senior associate at the Global Strategy Group, said.

"This comes at the same time that Democrats as a whole have become more liberal on race and gender issues, which makes Democrats more hospitable for Gen Z, at least in theory," Jordan added. "The Democratic Party has also simply grown more diverse over time, in line with national trends, while the Republican Party has grown whiter."

Members of Gen Z are generally anti-Trump and more likely to be informed on social issues. But when it comes to labeling themselves, Gen Z doesn't necessarily see itself as a generation of Democrats.

"I know that that's apparently what my generation is supposed to be, the progressive generation. But I would say that in my generation there is more outwardly spoken political division," Foster, who is right-leaning, said.

Foster added: "This generation wants — everybody wants — to have a say. Everybody wants to be heard."

While roughly half of the respondents to Business Insider's survey did not label themselves as either liberal or conservative, the remaining Gen Zers we polled were almost evenly split between the right and the left.

With this division come tensions that many teenagers and young adults believe to be as significant as or even greater than those of past generations.

Respondents identified political divisiveness as one of the top issues plaguing America right now, above environmental issues, gun control, or terrorism.

"There definitely is animosity between the two sides, in terms of people my age," Charlie Ciporin, an 18-year-old from Connecticut, said. "I do think that there is a pretty big political divide."

Ciporin recalls the difference between his all-boys high school and the nearby sister school the day after the 2016 election. While students at the somewhat conservative boys' school were pumped about Trump becoming president, the all-girls school, which many boys attended for certain classes, seemed to exist in a different reality.

"You walk into the girls' school and everyone's crying," Ciporin said. "People are just going crazy. Teachers are stopping class to talk about it. It was insane the difference that it made, just walking the 10-minute walk in between the two buildings. It was just, like, completely different worlds that day."

"This generation wants — everybody wants

> **— to have a say. Everybody wants to be heard."**
>
> Katy Foster

Among certain Gen Zers, provoking a reaction is seen as a political statement in and of itself.

For example, while younger Republicans are more likely to voice support for LGBT rights and acknowledge racial inequality, political correctness is also seen by many as a threat that needs to be addressed. More than half of Gen Zers say that too many people are "easily offended these days over the language that others use," according to Pew.

"A big part of the ideology for young conservative people is the anti-PC movement, which I think can hold some validity sometimes," Ciporin said. "But often it's just taken a little too far, and they'll just post pretty offensive memes and rhetoric."

"The other day I saw a post saying, like, in some places it's harder to come out as a conservative than as gay, which I didn't really agree with," Ciporin, the president of his school's gay-straight alliance, said. "A big part of this Instagram culture is just being, like, edgy and anti-PC, just for the sake of it."

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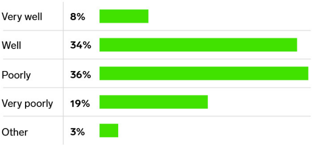
Photo: Hollis Johnson/Business Insider

Gen Z 2020

As members of Gen Z take in the political landscape through social media, they're desperate for change.

More than half of Americans age 13 to 21 believe things are generally going poorly or very poorly in the US, according to Business Insider's poll.

How Gen Z thinks things are going in the US



Source: Business Insider

When asked to identify the most important issue facing the country right now, the top response was President Donald Trump. This particular question in the poll prompted respondents to fill in any answer of their choosing. Respondents used adjectives such as "stupid," "disgusting, and "incompetent," while one person accused Trump of "caging up literal children."

"Trump thinks he can do whatever he wants and doesn't care about who he hurts," another wrote.

Gen Z also feels overwhelmingly let down by the American government. Some 70% of Gen Zers believe the government should be doing more to solve problems, according to a poll conducted by Pew in late 2018. That figure is significantly higher for Gen Z than for any other current generation, with 64% of millennials and less than half of baby boomers believing the same.

With the 2020 elections approaching, politicians are targeting Gen Z. Already, many presidential hopefuls are following in Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's footsteps and boosting their Instagram presence. But it will take more than a few Instagram Live sessions to win over this politically opinionated generation.

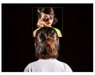
Gen Z is seeking politicians who can address issues that are personally relevant to them and to people they know, whether that means LGBT protections, addressing climate change, fixing income inequality, or legalizing pot.

With the majority unwilling to identify with either political party, there is an opportunity for politicians on both sides of the aisle to connect with Gen Z voters. But don't expect this generation to solve America's division issue in 2020.

"We often place a lot of hope in this new generation to kind of fix problems and to change the nature and dynamics of politics," Deckman said. "And at the end of the day ... we will look at turnout numbers and find, of course, younger people still aren't out voting and organizing."

Reporting by Kate Taylor
Editing by (((Madeline Stone))), Cadie Thompson, Matt Turner, and Alyson Shontell
Design by Skye (((Gould))) and Samantha Lee
Photography by Hollis Johnson
Graphics by Shayanne Gal

MORE ON HOW GEN Z LIVES



IDENTITY

The oldest Gen Zer doesn't remember life before Facebook, and that's led to some dark consequences.

SPENDING

Gen Z is leading an evolution in shopping that could kill brands as we know them.

TECH

America's phone-obsessed teens are always multitasking, and it's starting to cost them.

SURVEY

We surveyed 1,800 teens and 20-somethings and they revealed what's cool and what's not in 2019.

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