

# The 2024 Presidential Election: The Broken Bond Between Youth and Democracy

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HARVARD Kennedy School

**ASH CENTER**

for Democratic Governance  
and Innovation

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## About the Author

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## Introduction

The 2024 election saw Donald Trump make significant gains among young voters, increasing his support among 18- to 29-year-olds by 10 percentage points.<sup>1</sup> This represents the highest level of youth support for a Republican presidential candidate since 2008. As illustrated in the figures below, this shift marks a substantial departure from recent cycles, which have consistently shown strong support from young people for Democratic candidates.

Figure 1: Republican Presidential Candidates’ Youth Vote Share<sup>2</sup>

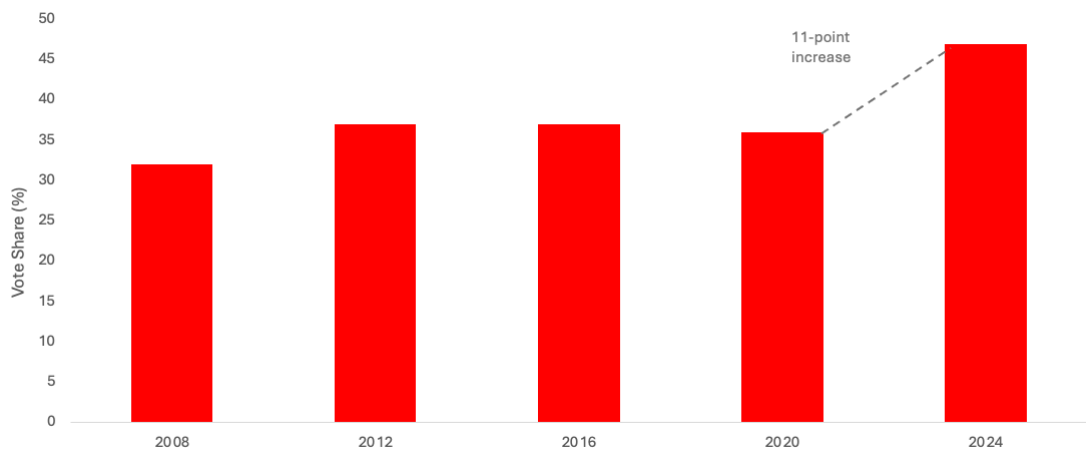
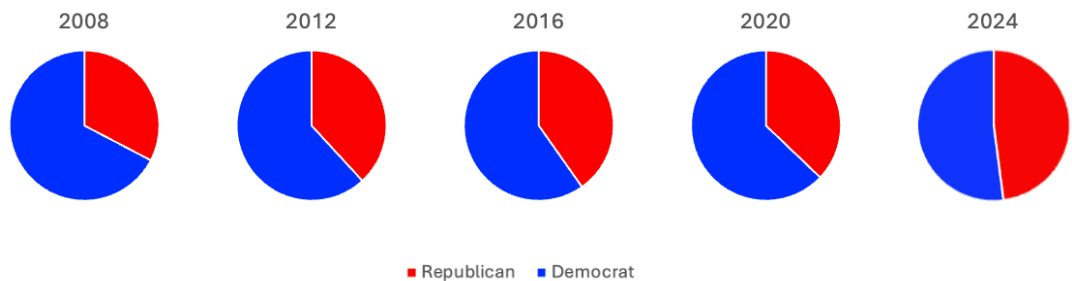
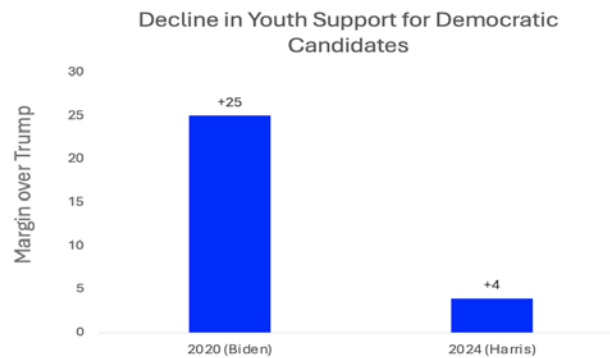


Figure 2: Youth Voting Patterns in U.S. Presidential Elections<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 3: Decline in Youth Support for Democratic Candidates<sup>4</sup>**

At first glance, this surge for Trump among younger voters risks drawing a narrow reading: young people are shifting to the political right.<sup>5</sup> This ideological interpretation has often been used as evidence that Generation Z is emerging as “one of the most conservative generations” and that Democrats are losing ground because of this shift.<sup>6</sup> However, this framing misses the deeper relational dynamics that sit at the bedrock of democracy. Young people increasingly feel disillusioned with a political system they perceive as ineffective and disconnected from their lives. As a result, many are turning toward populist and anti-democratic actors who offer a sense of agency and the promise of radical change. Focusing solely on ideology overlooks a deeper longing for influence, participation, and the possibility of being part of something transformative. These desires are not anti-democratic; on the contrary, they reflect the very promise that democracy is meant to fulfill. At the heart of this moment sits a fragmented relationship between youth and democracy—one that must be repaired if the system is to survive.

This fracture reflects a deeper issue: Democracy is not simply a set of procedures or institutions. At its core, it rests on a relational contract between citizen, vote, and government. The vote is central to this relationship—a symbol not only of equality but of **possibility**. It affirms a citizen’s place in the political community, carrying the promise that through democratic participation, individuals can exercise agency, shape outcomes, and—crucially—drive change within the system. Voting, then, is not a wholly rational process driven by our ideological and economic incentives. Instead, it is intimately tied to our perception of ourselves within the system and our relationship with that system.

Democracy depends on a core belief: that change is possible within the system, and while imperfections are inevitable, the system tends toward agency, responsiveness, and adaptability. It is not just a vehicle for stability but a mechanism—ideally the most desired one—for enacting change.

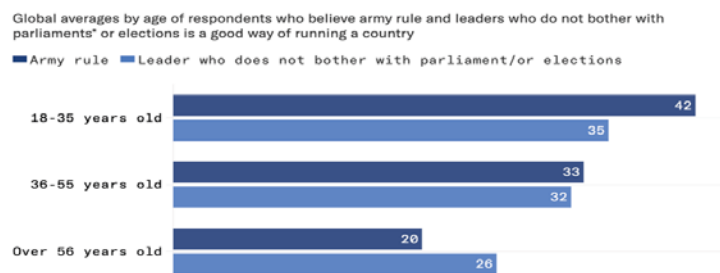
This belief is the glue that holds the system together, sustaining it over time. In a healthy democracy, this belief stretches beyond election day. It is not merely about trust in individual politicians but faith in the system as a whole. No matter who holds power

today, they can be replaced, because the machinery of democracy remains open to renewal. Participation has power, and politics remains open to the influence of its people. Crucially, this belief must hold across all groups, affirming the equality of influence promised by the vote. When democracy is no longer seen as a system through which meaningful change can be achieved, its hold begins to slip.

## Gen Z's Damaged Relationship with Democracy

Understanding the shift in youth voting behavior requires examining how this relational contract has fractured for many young people. Surveys consistently show that Gen Z is the age group that is the most disillusioned with democratic governance.<sup>7</sup> While all age groups have grown increasingly discontent with the American democratic system in recent years, the dissatisfaction has been especially marked among younger people. Prior to the 2024 election, only 27% of Gen Z respondents strongly agreed that democracy is the best form of government, compared to 69% of those over 58.<sup>8</sup> Less than one-third of Americans under 30 trust the government, and only 16% believe that democracy is working well for young people.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 5: Perceptions of Army Rule and Leaders Who Do Not Bother with Parliament or Elections by Age Group**



Source: Open Society Foundations, "Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?" September 2023.

For democracy to work, citizens must believe they have the power to shape it. Yet for Gen Z, the defining political experiences of their lifetimes have reinforced a sense of exclusion from democratic agency. Instead of a system that enables them to change their circumstances and play an active role in molding them, democracy has often felt like a structure that acts upon them without their participation or consent.

Consider their entry into political consciousness. While the COVID-19 lockdowns were widely accepted as essential public health measures, they were policies enacted without input from the young people they directly impacted. Restrictions were often justified as necessary to protect older generations, a values-based choice that sent an implicit message that one generation was more important than another. These

lockdowns had profound long-term effects on young people’s mental health, economic opportunities, and social development.<sup>10</sup> For many, this was their first brush with democratic governance. Yet recent research suggests that instead of instilling a sense of inclusion and trust, these formative experiences reinforced a view of politics as distant, unresponsive, and one-directional—a system that constrained them rather than supporting their participation.<sup>11</sup>

This pattern was evident in other domains as well. Gen Z is entering a climate where economic mobility appears increasingly out of reach. Homeownership feels unattainable for the first time, wages have stagnated, and tuition debt locks them into financial precarity. This sense of hopelessness was reflected in the 2024 election, where “the economy and jobs” ranked as the most important issue for young voters.<sup>12</sup>

Even the spaces carved out specifically for young people have increasingly felt unwelcoming and volatile, failing to guarantee their safety. School shootings surged by 925% from 1997 to 2022.<sup>13</sup> Since 2019, firearm-related injuries have become the leading cause of death among U.S. children.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, climate change offers another example of a system that has failed to effectively consider their interests and enact change to support them. For Gen Z, climate change is not just a forecast but their inheritance. Regardless of political stance, it symbolizes a burden they did not choose but will have to carry.

These examples are not a critique of any individual policy choices. Rather, they highlight a broader sentiment: democracy, as a system premised on a relationship of trust between the people, the vote, and democratic representatives, has failed to demonstrate to its youngest members that it can sustain this relationship. Gen Z has repeatedly witnessed a system that falters in its ability to respond to their needs, restricting them rather than improving their lives. Political psychologists have long referred to ages 18 through 25 as the “impressionable years,” a period when political experiences leave lasting marks on a person’s future worldview.<sup>15</sup> By the time of the 2024 election, 31% of American youth reported feeling they lacked the freedom to shape their own lives—a record high.<sup>16</sup> Rates of depression and hopelessness were nearly twice as high among Gen Z as among adults over 25.<sup>17</sup> For many in Gen Z, the impression left is not of democratic empowerment but democratic exclusion.

Past generations felt empowered to reshape democracy into what they thought it should and ought to be. Young people understood that they held agency in the system and took it upon themselves to lead the Civil Rights Movement, protest the Vietnam War and apartheid in South Africa, and call for the voting age to be lowered. Democracy writ large was a constant work in progress, and young people felt they could grab the paintbrush and play a part in creating the future they wanted to see. Their place in the system, and their relationship to both the vote and government, was linked by a sense of agency and faith in their capacity to deploy it.



## Filling the Gap: Trump's Relationship with Gen Z

Today, that sense of agency is unraveling. In moments of crisis, systems are not only tested but redefined. Openings emerge to reimagine what is possible, rewarding those that step in and respond. MAGA capitalized on this space, successfully expanding, shaping, and claiming it as their own. By tapping into youth dissatisfaction, they provided young people with a renewed sense of voice. MAGA, in many ways, offered them the democratic paintbrush that had long felt out of reach, framing their movement as a vehicle not just for participation but for transformation.

This was not incidental; direct, youth-focused outreach was central to MAGA strategy. The campaign launched a new Republican youth advisory council, co-chaired by 18-year-old Brilyn Hollyhand, with the aim of meeting young voters in their own spaces.<sup>18</sup> Trump also partnered with Charlie Kirk's Turning Point USA (TPUSA), a conservative youth organization with a presence on over 3,500 high school and college campuses, to mobilize youth.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to Harris's 2023 Fight for Our Freedoms College Tour, which visited 12 campuses over one month, TPUSA focused on recurring, year-round engagement and relationship-building.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Trump's appearance on Joe Rogan's heavily youth-orientated podcast gained over 30 million views compared to Harris' appearance on the young female-focused podcast "Call Her Daddy," which failed to reach 1 million viewers.

Importantly, this was more than simply "reaching out." The MAGA campaign didn't just promise new politicians or policies; it listened to young voters' deep dissatisfaction with the system and offered a promise of structural change to the system itself, highlighting its failures and offering a plan to deconstruct it. A vote for Trump became akin to an act of reclaiming agency—an act that was rebellious, powerful, and fundamentally different from other political choices previously presented to young people.

## A Global Story

This is not an isolated incident of democratic dissatisfaction and opportunistic mobilization within U.S. borders. Young people across the globe aged 18 to 35 are consistently found to be the least enthusiastic about democracy, the most supportive of military rule, and the most sympathetic to the idea of a strong leader who does away with parliaments and elections.<sup>21</sup> Similar patterns in youth voting are emerging around the world, particularly in European democracies, where populist parties are capitalizing on this growing disillusionment.

In the U.K., 52% of young people believe that Britain would be better off under a stronger leader "who does not have to bother with parliament and elections," while 17% of 18- to 24-year-olds say that they would vote for the right-wing populist Reform Party if an election were held tomorrow.<sup>22</sup> In France, 32% of those under 35 believe democracy is not the best political system, while the far-right National Rally Party saw its youth

support jump by 108% in the most recent election.<sup>23</sup> Similar patterns are evident in Germany, where 41% of young people express distrust in democracy, and the extreme-right AfD increased its youth vote from 6% in 2021 to 21% in 2025.<sup>24</sup>

The mistake is to simply view the young generation as becoming increasingly conservative. In fact, the number of young people identifying as conservative has not changed significantly since 2006.<sup>25</sup> Rather than signaling a rightward shift, this pattern is better understood as relational, a reaction to a system perceived as unresponsive or exclusionary. Young people's commitment to mainstream parties has softened, as they increasingly identify as independents, and support for fringe parties on both sides of the political spectrum is rapidly increasing, such as the U.K.'s Green Party and Germany's Die Linke.<sup>26</sup> The real shift is toward movements that actively engage young people, treating them as participants rather than passive observers and offering them a sense of control and belonging in a system that has long felt distant and immovable. The common thread between all these groups is their acknowledgement of the failures of the status quo and their promise of meaningful systems change.

## What Now? A Path Forward for Democratic Relationship-Building

Electoral politics has often rested on the assumption that young people are either naturally liberal-leaning or unlikely to vote, a belief that has shaped how parties engage—or fail to engage—with them. This logic becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: by presuming that young people will not meaningfully participate, parties often choose not to invest in outreach or policy development that speaks to their priorities. Implicit in this assumption is a quiet removal of agency, treating youth not as persuadable, independent actors but as fixed or irrelevant. In doing so, this assumption erodes the very foundation of democracy's social contract, weakening young people's belief that the system functions for them and reinforcing their disillusionment with a process that neither engages them nor genuinely responds to their concerns. Trump's 2024 campaign rejected this premise—and was rewarded for doing so.

Restoring the relationship between young people and democracy requires reimagining and strengthening how democratic systems engage with them. One approach is to build engagement structures at three levels: individual, partisan, and governmental.

At the **individual level**, young people need places that offer a sense of belonging and community. “Political homes” are inclusive spaces where individuals come together around a shared purpose, supporting their political development and increasing the likelihood of sustained civic engagement.<sup>27</sup> Belonging can help young people understand their place in society and their capacity to shape it. A range of studies have demonstrated that connection to a political home, and seeing others participating in democratic life, significantly increases political engagement.<sup>28</sup>

Critically, this means reaching young people where they already feel a sense of belonging and demonstrating that politics also has a space for them. For areas where

youth—especially non-college youth—tend to be disconnected from political communities, this is especially important and could include preexisting social and community networks such as sports leagues, social hubs, and niche festivals and concerts. In 2024, MAGA effectively offered disillusioned young people a new sense of home, helping Trump gain the support of 56% of first-time voters and 65% of those who had never attended college.<sup>29</sup> Reaching young people through the spaces they already inhabit—and demonstrating that democracy can live there too—is essential to rebuilding the relationship between youth and democracy, especially in areas historically underserved by political institutions.

At the **partisan level**, political parties must go beyond performative outreach and build substantive, two-way mechanisms of engagement. Social media risks further entrenching a one-directional model, creating the illusion that connecting with young people through short videos is sufficient for meaningful engagement. True engagement requires actively listening to young people, understanding their needs, and building structures that translate these concerns into concrete policy proposals and messaging strategies. For example, Spain's Podemos Party developed Participa, a digital platform providing a voting arena and deliberation forum, which actively seeks to understand members' opinions by providing open-source spaces for anyone to freely propose, discuss, and vote on policy initiatives. Just as importantly, youth engagement structures cannot exist within a political echo chamber. As demonstrated by MAGA's 2024 campaign, parties must find ways to reach out beyond presumed supporters, targeting those who feel left behind or written off.

At the **governmental level**, demonstrating young people's place within democratic systems is key to enhancing their sense of belonging and autonomy. This requires showing young people that democracy is not just a distant process but a living network of institutions, relationships, and everyday interactions that shape their lives. Increasing contact with representatives and improving civic education can help clarify these connections. Going even further, embedding youth engagement structures into democratic governance systems can shift power dynamics in meaningful ways. Institutionalized mechanisms, such as youth assemblies and councils, can offer structured pathways that give youth power and agency. For example, the Philippines' Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Council) is a legally established governance mechanism with its own budget and national agency, giving youth a clear role in governance.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Finland's mandatory youth councils, deemed influential by 60% of youth, have the legal autonomy to influence municipal activities relevant to their well-being, such as education, health, and mobility.<sup>31</sup> Such structures better position governments to understand young people's perspectives while creating pathways that provide direct mechanisms for youth agency and power within their democracies. Critically, they symbolize that youth participation is not optional but an essential component of a healthy democracy.

## Conclusion

Viewing the youth vote for Trump as the result of a conservative shift oversimplifies the moment. It reduces democratic participation to an individual, rational choice, abstracted from the broader system it operates within. Democracy is not just ideological or procedural; it is fundamentally relational. As a result, the shift we are witnessing is not just about ideology. It reflects a fractured relationship between young people and a democratic system that no longer seems able to offer them a sense of belonging or agency.

In this faltering relationship, where participation no longer feels meaningful, openings emerge for new imaginaries. As the democratic promise has withered, space opens for new forms of engagement and meaning. MAGA effectively filled that void. Trump's movement succeeded in part because it convinced young voters it offered a clear alternative to political stagnation—an imaginative break from the status quo. Viewing the current moment as a crisis of imagination that only one side has fully seized makes room for others to respond. It challenges the pro-democracy movement to demonstrate that they are listening, to find new ways to imagine civic engagement, and to offer an alternative to young people that genuinely provides agency. By building structures for substantive engagement, U.S. democracy can demonstrate that change is possible within the system and remind young people that the democratic paintbrush, long felt to be out of reach, still belongs in their hands.

Stepping back, this moment reveals something deeper: democracy's survival has never been guaranteed. It does not endure by tradition, assumed legitimacy, or abstract ideals. It survives because of a collective belief in its ability to maintain the contract between voter, vote, and government. Its survival is inherently relational, and that belief is not innate but cultivated through lived experience of a system that works. Crucially, this faith cannot be selective; it must be shared across generations—including, urgently, by the young.

The real challenge now is not to reclaim young people for any particular political party. Rather, it is to restore their relationship with democracy itself. That means refocusing democracy as a relational project—one not built purely on procedures and ideological choices but a system made up of agency, belonging, and engagement. At its core, this involves repairing the damaged relationship between youth, the vote, and democratic governance—because if young people no longer see democracy as a system that serves them, they will seek alternatives elsewhere.

## Notes

1. Throughout this piece, I use “youth” primarily to refer to voters under 30, with particular attention to 18- to 24-year-olds, the age group showing the most dramatic shift leading up to the 2024 election.
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