

GEN Z CIVIC VIBE CHECK

HOW & WHY THEY SHOW UP



INSTITUTE FOR
**CITIZENS &
SCHOLARS™**





WHAT'S INSIDE

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- Hear from Gen Z
- Key Learnings
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Survey Methodology

YPulse conducted a ~4-minute survey that was fielded among a national sample of 1,002 US respondents, ages 14 to 22, from August 26-28, 2025. Quotas were set to ensure national representation by age, gender, region, race/ethnicity.

For a nationally representative sample of 1,002 respondents aged 14-22, the margin of error at the 95% confidence level was approximately $\pm 3\%$.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

C&S motivates young Americans to create bold, fresh civic solutions. This data shows what's getting in their way.

These findings challenge the myth that Gen Z is checked out. Nine in ten young people care deeply about their communities, but many don't know where to start or whether their efforts will make a difference. They told us what actually moves them: working alongside friends, seeing tangible results, and having clear, accessible ways to get involved.

Young people want to be heard, trusted, and shown that their participation matters.

This survey gives leaders, educators, and funders a thoughtful way to meet young people where they are and how to help them turn their interest into impact.

▶ **Young people care about their community.**
Almost all young people feel responsible for their communities. Very few (10%) say they don't get involved because they don't care.

▶ **Uncertainty holds them back.**
The biggest barriers are not knowing where to start (37%) and not believing they can make a difference (33%).

▶ **Their “why” changes with age.**
Teens are motivated by opportunities to be with friends (55%) and getting into a good school or scholarship (42%). Young adults are more motivated by injustice, economic struggles or leaders abusing power.

▶ **Most engagement happens offline.**
The top ways to get involved are voting in elections (73%) and talking about issues in person (77%). Young people are less likely to comment or debate online (46%).

▶ **Impact is everything.**
Young people will get involved if they can see how their efforts make an impact (42%) and have the tools to create solutions themselves (32%).

“Young people *really want* to do this. But they know they need the skills and mentoring to be able to do it.”

Audra Watson
Chief of Youth Civic Programs



Young people care about their community and feel a sense of responsibility to be involved.

Very few said they were apathetic.

KEY LEARNINGS

9 out of 10
care about their community



“Young people do want to help and they actively want to make a difference. Because one of the biggest things I get when I’m calling people, calling local organizations that *they’re surprised that someone so young wants to talk to them and actually do something.*”

Rifa, 16, New York

Barriers to getting involved in their community stem from uncertainty and self-doubt.

Uncertainty holds them back.

The biggest obstacles are not knowing how to start and not believing they can make a difference.



“There is so much political discourse right now, ***I think that causes a lot of youth to be oftentimes overstimulated or overwhelmed.***”

Sophia, 17, Arizona



“I was just always the type of person like, oh, I'm not sure if I should apply. I don't even know if I'm going to get it. ***I'm someone that even before the rejection hits me, I'm just like, oh yeah, I'm going to get rejected.***”

Tara, 16, Texas

KEY LEARNINGS

**Motivation to get involved
varies by age.**

Their “why” changes with age.

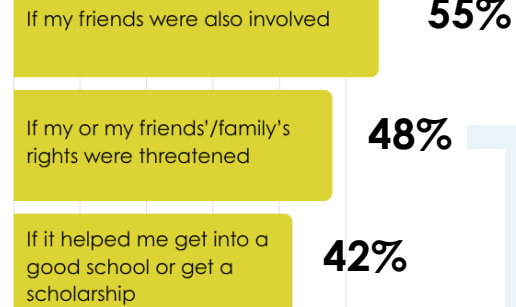
Teens are motivated by opportunities to participate with friends and getting into a good school or scholarship while young adults are more motivated by injustices.



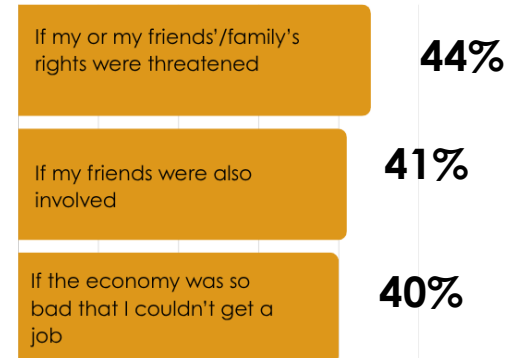
“I just started texting my friends and I was like, *Hey, are you interested in working in civic engagement with me?* And they were very excited and engaged and like I said, they helped me do this from the ground up.”

Alison, 17, Georgia

Teens 14–18



Young adults 19–22



KEY LEARNINGS



“We helped pass a bill that mandates Asian American history in K–12 classrooms in New Jersey. We came up with the idea after the pandemic when we saw a rise in hatred towards the Asian American community. And that *ended up affecting my family and my community personally. And I felt like I had to make a change.*”

David, 17, New Jersey

Most engagement happens offline.

The top expected ways to get involved are voting in elections and discussing issues in person. Young people are less inclined to comment or debate online.

KEY LEARNINGS

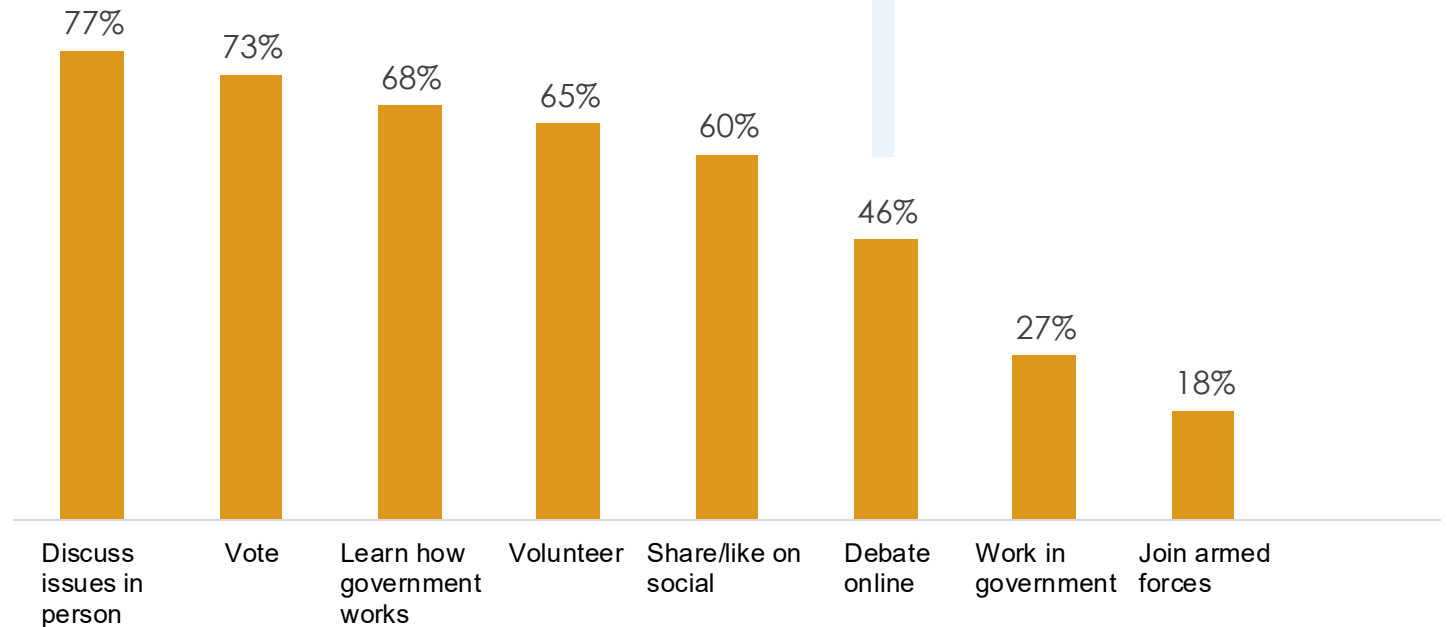
“I’ve gotten more comfortable being in these situations, *more comfortable with having conversations* with people who have different view viewpoints”

Jonas, 21, New Jersey



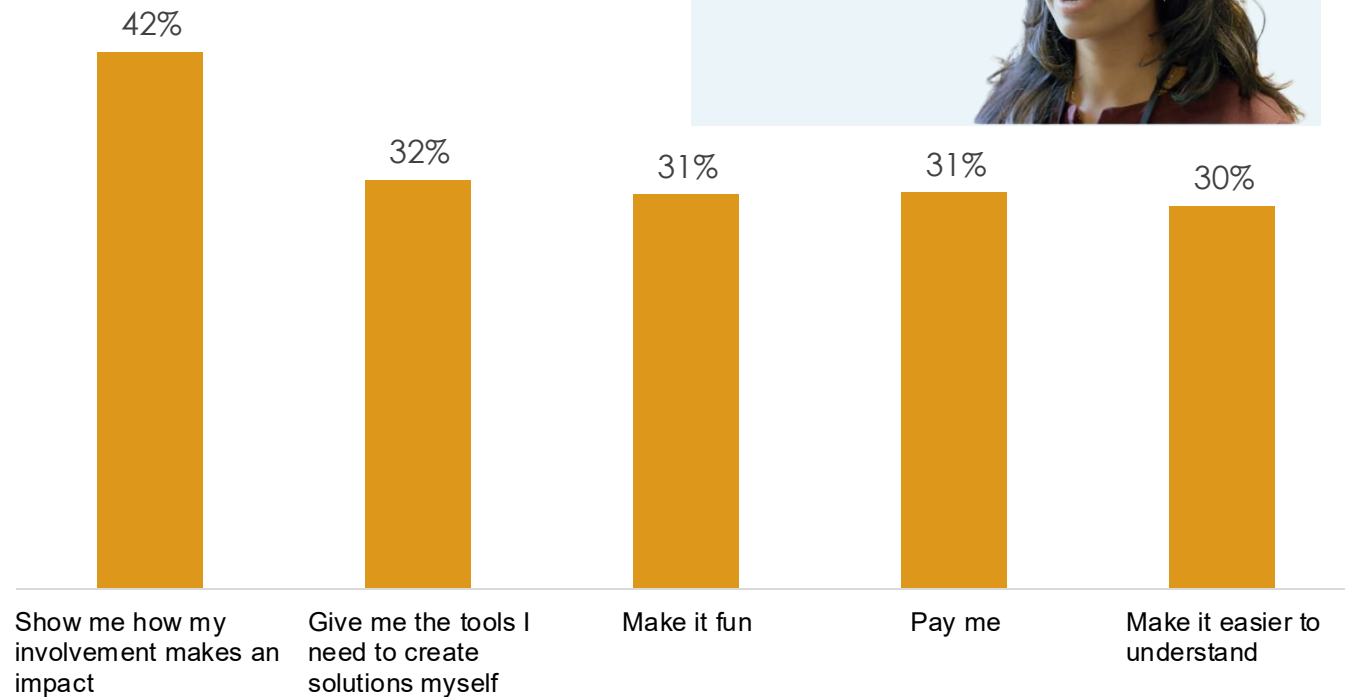
“*Online spaces can make dialogue feel hostile*, so having in-person spaces on campus where students can sit down, ask questions, and actually be heard makes a huge difference.”

Alex, 22, Pennsylvania



Impact is everything.

The top motivator for involvement is seeing how their efforts make an impact, followed by having the tools to create solutions themselves.



“My project ensures that hospitalization does not mean losing the right to vote. We [pre-med students] were shadowing in the hospital and what happened was *our team leader actually noticed that there were patients who were unable to vote and kind of asking questions, how can we vote, how can do this?* ”

Aditri, 18, Virginia



**Young people want to be heard,
trusted, and shown that their
participation matters.**

Here's what older adult allies can do to help Gen Z get involved in their community.

- ▶ **Give them a starting point.**
Lower barrier to entry. Make it easy (and fun) for young people to get involved.
- ▶ **Create space for real talk.**
They **want** to have difficult conversations. Let them do it in class, at work, and at home.
- ▶ **Connect civic action to real life and make it social.**
Fund and design peer-led, youth-driven projects on issues that matter to them.
- ▶ **Lean in.**
Co-create with young people. Build intergenerational spaces where everyone learns from each other. Talk *to* young people, not *about* them.
- ▶ **Show the impact.**
Lead with change and let young people tell their own stories.



Across the country young people are stepping up to solve problems in their community.

▶ See what other young people are doing.

▶ Sign up to be the first to know about C&S opportunities.



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