

## APPROACHING ELECTION DAY IN THE US: Tensions, Turnout, and Teachable Moments

Like their peers globally, young Americans are disengaging from political life.

Youth globally are less engaged with political life than past generations: “they’re voting less, rejecting party membership, and telling researchers that their country’s leaders aren’t working in their interests.”

Americans, in particular, are “exhausted” by politics and disillusioned by democracy. Significant percentages of Generation Z Americans (those aged 18–25) question whether democracy is the best governing system, and nearly half (47%) think either that “democracy or dictatorship makes no difference” or that “dictatorship could be good in certain circumstances.” These conditions can allow for extremist or undemocratic ideologies to take hold.

Student voting data from 2022 should be viewed as a wakeup call.

Millennials and Gen Zs are the most racially diverse generations in American history. Together, they form a formidable voting bloc: 40.8 million Gen Zs are eligible to vote in 2024.

The 2020 US presidential election drew strong numbers of student voters. That enthusiasm, however, was not sustained. Fewer than a third of students voted in the 2022 midterm election, a 9-percentage point drop from the 2018 midterm. There was also a significant drop in voting rates (down 16 percentage points) among Black women, traditionally the demographic on campus with the highest voting rates.

College student voting rates are impacted by many factors.

While spirited student voter mobilization efforts matter, campus leaders should also consider long-term attention to the environment for political learning and engagement in democracy. Strong political climates are shaped by many factors, including (1) feelings of well-being and belonging across groups on campus; (2) relationships with supportive professors; (3) pervasive, frequent, and quality political discussions across campus and disciplines; (4) multiple opportunities and institutional support for students to learn how to be effective community organizers, activists, and leaders; and (5) a focus on closing equity gaps in voting.

Elections are ideal teachable moments for learning about democracy’s history, principles, and practices, across disciplines.

Every national election presents unique challenges worthy of targeted attention. This fall, disinformation is a key threat to both student learning and democracy’s future. College and university leaders can take the following actions to counter disinformation.

- Young people distrust mainstream media and look to social media as a main source of information; educate students in digital literacy to help them identify disinformation, conspiracy theories, and lies about candidates, the election, and the state of democracy.
- Help students spot and assess facts in classrooms, issue discussions, and election-related activities. Prepare faculty and discussion facilitators to correct disinformation in the moment.
- Interrupt and correct false narratives, even if those narratives align with those of a candidate or party.
- Task students with the responsibilities of daily fact-checking and communicating accurate information about candidates, the election, and the state of democracy.
- Publicize an institutional commitment to truth and facts.
- Access helpful resources like the [University of Michigan’s library guide](#) on misinformation and the [American Library Association’s “Reader. Voter. Ready.”](#) materials.