

To: Voter Participation Center
From: Celinda Lake and Jamie Lee, LRP
Re: Results from Two Online Message Boards Among Generation Z
Date: May 22, 2020

Gen Z has garnered an increasing amount of interest over the past couple years, and VPC has taken a lead in studying these young people and the role they play in the American electorate. In last year's Gen Z message board study, we learned what is important to this generation and how we can more effectively mobilize them to register and vote for the general election. Now though, with the coronavirus pandemic in full force and the 2020 general election mere months away, it is more important than ever to study this generation and build on previous research, as their experiences and outlook on the world will be largely defined by what is going on right now. In 2016, Gen Z made up 1.9% of the presidential electorate, and they are projected to increase their share to 5.8% in 2020.^{1,2} Understanding this group's attitudes towards American politics and the US in general, as well as their top priorities and concerns, will be critical in registering these young potential voters and getting out the vote.

Recently, LRP completed two online message boards, each among 20 Gen Z participants from various battleground states.³ Participants in the message boards logged in twice a day for three days of discussion, providing deep insight into a range of topics, including how the coronavirus has affected them and how they perceive the American political system. While last year's study focused on mobilization efforts, especially voter registration, this study focuses heavily on how the coronavirus has impacted participants' daily lives, worldviews, access to election information, and their plan to vote in November, namely the role that vote-by-mail will play.

This memo is brief in order to outline several key findings from the message board. This memo will be followed by a deck that will delve more in-depth into the participants' respondents and provide actionable steps forward for the team.

Here are some of the major findings:

- 1. Participants are concerned about the state of the country, and their outlook moving forward is pretty bleak unless they start to see changes from federal leadership, both more immediately in the handling of the pandemic and long-term in the issues they are most worried about.** These Gen Zers are concerned and anxious about the way things are going in the U.S. and in their own lives right now, largely due to the coronavirus - both in the way leaders have gone about dealing with the issue (namely

¹ VPC Demo Report 2018

² Gen Z 2018 share of electorate in the battleground states represented here, from CPS Demo Report 2018: AZ – 5.2%, FL – 3.0%, GA – 3.9%, NC – 4.3%, MI – 2.8%, NV – 4.7%, PA – 3.5%, WI – 4.3%, CO – 3.2%, IA – 3.3%, ME – 1.6%, NH – 2.8%, NM – 3.5%

³ Participants were recruited from a list of battleground states (AZ, FL, GA, NC, MI, NV, PA, WI, CO, IA, ME, NH, and NM) using a database recruit. Recruitment was based on a mix of gender ID, a mix of age (half over and under 20), mix of race ID, eligible to vote by November 2020, half students, half college educated. Although the demographics for both groups were comparable, they were conducted with a one-day gap (May 11-13 and May 13-15) so that we would be able to adjust the creative for the second group as necessary.

the Trump administration) and in how people are reacting to the restrictions put in place. There are some other concerns driving negativity in this group, such as the spread of misinformation, the US political system in general, and racial injustices, but coronavirus is definitely at the top of everyone's minds.

2. **The virus has impacted each participant in one way or another, the most prevalent being how they participate in and pay for their education.** Several participants have had their high school and college classes transferred to online classes as a result of the virus, and they do not appreciate how the transition to online learning has occurred at their schools. They feel that they have seen a massive drop in the quality of their education, and they are upset that they are still paying the same fees regardless. Those who just graduated college are worried about entering a job market with so few opportunities right now, and even those who have a job already are concerned because the youngest people are always the first to get laid off. Gen Zers in last year's study were similarly worried about finding jobs and their financial future, but now the threat is more immediate and visible. The loss of their classroom environment combined with their concern over their financial future has played a role in generally declining mental health among participants. They say that the feeling of isolation along with the added stressors of the new normal has led to an increase in anxiety, and things look worse for those who were already suffering from mental health issues.
3. **Participants are social media savvy, but they know its limits as a reliable news source.** Both groups love spending time on social media, especially Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. However, they would not pick social media as an information source over other outlets such as The New York Times or other credible places (Politico, BBC, NBC, CBC, NPR, etc.). They don't think social media is a reliable source of facts and information, and when they do see news stories on these platforms, they say that they like to do their own research to check the validity of what they see or hear. This group values doing their own research; in the conversation about voting later on in the group, they emphasize that they wouldn't accept anyone's recommendation on who to vote for blindly – they need to find out for themselves who the best candidate is.
4. **Participants are selective about which messengers and messages they are willing to listen to.** In both groups, we don't see a lot of interest in influencers as a whole. Participants say they follow friends and people they know personally for the most part, and when they do follow influencers, it's because their account relates to some specific type of interest they have – sports, fitness, travel, humor, etc. When presented with the different influencer posts later on in the study, the most common critiques of the pieces are the length of the captions (too long), a disconnect between the image and the caption, and a general sense that the posts seem "fake." The vote by mail piece, for instance, worked a little better since the influencer was by a mailbox – there is a connection to the caption. The post about the struggle of the influencer's ancestors worked better due to the less-posed image and the personal story and quote. Participants think these posts could be improved with a less wordy and more direct call

to action, pictures that better relate to the topic at hand (like a picture that has a ballot in it), or more of an emphasis on the HOW to register/vote and less on the WHY. The emphasis that participants place on information over emotion may be reflective of the fact that these participants do not say that they are particularly angry with the way things are going in the country right now.

5. **Participants think voting is extremely important, but they are critical of certain aspects of the election system, namely the two-party system and the electoral college.** The majority of participants say that voting is very important. Most have voted before, and even more plan to vote in the November election. However, there is definitely some cynicism about the American electoral process. Several participants are fed up with how partisan the parties have become and with how little is being accomplished as a result. In fact, despite their generally liberal opinions, many participants don't identify with either party, largely due to the stark partisan divide among leaders in the federal government that keep them from acting on the issues that participants care about – climate change, student debt, racial violence. To some participants, the division has gotten bad enough to warrant the switch to a multi-party system. And, while they think their vote makes a difference, they think their vote would count more if the electoral college was eliminated or if districts weren't so heavily gerrymandered.
6. **Even though both groups are adamant about voting in November, there isn't much enthusiasm towards either presidential candidate.** There is plenty of dislike towards and distrust in President Trump, from the way he has handled the pandemic, to his unprofessionalism, to the way he has spread hate among his supporters. However, former Vice President Biden does not have much of an appeal among these participants either. They are worried that he is too old, too moderate, and not mentally capable of doing the job. Tara Reade's sexual assault allegations also play a significant role in negative attitudes towards the former Vice President – it's significant that this news has broken through to this group, when they have seen so little about the election lately. All of this considered, participants say that voting for "the lesser of two evils" is preferable to voting for a third option, and completely skipping the election is a non-starter.
7. **Participants in both groups are passionate about social justice issues.** The most important issues among these groups are racial equality and justice and mass incarceration and criminal justice reform. For many, these two issues are related, as much of the reform they'd like to see deals with the racial bias in the criminal justice system. Some of this anger towards the system stems from the recent murder of Ahmaud Arbery – they are sick of just how often they see instances of racial violence, and while this group is generally not very angry, they are angry on this issue. Other notable issues were climate change and student debt, both of which came up as issues throughout the message boards. There is a lot of urgency behind these issues, and participants want to see candidates discuss these issues more. They generally see matters of criminal justice as something for state and local governments, especially police departments, to fix. For other issues such as climate change and student debt,

they want to see the federal government take a lead role. Ideally, they'd like to see the federal government taking a role in all of these issues, but they generally don't think of this as realistic. These participants generally feel like the government isn't doing enough, particularly when it comes to helping those who are struggling, so they do not put a lot of faith in the ability of government at the highest level to make sweeping changes. This is especially true of those who say corruption in government is part of the problem.

8. **Both groups have seen a decline in news about the election.** Participants' exposure to election information has dramatically decreased since the beginning of the pandemic. They have only heard blips of information here and there, such as the Tara Reade allegations and Bernie Sanders dropping out. In terms of candidate ads, they've seen next to nothing with the exception of an online Biden or Trump ad here and there. Even then, they aren't remembering specific things that were said in the ads – mostly just who the ad was in support of or against. Things have gone nearly silent in terms of election news, and this is something not even the participants had fully realized until it was brought to their attention. Overall, their interest in election news has not changed since the start of the pandemic. They are not actively looking for election news, but they are not so cynical towards the election as to turn away from new information
9. **Participants think that the process of registering and voting is easy.** The majority of respondents are already registered to vote, and they think the process is already pretty simple. We found the same thing with last year's Gen Z groups – the perception of simplicity here has not changed. A lot of them were able to register online, and others did so through their high school or college. They don't think the process itself needs to be easier, but they suggest that better advertising on how to register could be helpful. Similar to registering, participants think voting itself is easy, and they can't think of obstacles that young people face when voting where they live. Several participants mentioned that making Election Day a national holiday would make the voting process easier, and a few even volunteered making absentee voting more accessible nationally without prompting.
10. **There is a general openness towards voting by mail.** Many respondents already understand what voting by mail is, and several have done it themselves while they were away at college or out-of-state. Those who have voted by mail say that it is easy, and the only real difficulty is making sure you know when to request it and mail it back. While several prefer voting in-person, the benefits they listed mostly relate to the experience of voting rather than simplicity or accessibility. Voting in-person makes them feel good, and they like the community aspect. Voters recognize that vote-by-mail is less time-consuming and important for social distancing. Almost every single participant is committed to voting in November, and a majority are likely to absentee vote in November if the pandemic continues to be an issue at that time.

Here are three big challenges we face leading up to November:

1. **Gen Zers are selective about who they listen to and where they go for news and advice about the election.** This makes it difficult to focus on one platform or one type of account. There is not a one-size-fits-all messenger and reaching this generation could prove to be difficult.
2. **They are not hearing or seeing a lot of news about the election, and what little news they are getting isn't sticking.** The coronavirus has taken up most of their attention, and there is little space for much else. We must figure out how to effectively engage a population that is not overly eager to hear about the election.
3. **Gen Zers aren't completely convinced of the importance of voting by mail, and this could be a problem come November if we are still social distancing.** If those not familiar with vote by mail and the process involved do not get the information they need, they may end up sitting this election out.

Here are three big opportunities to take advantage of moving forward:

1. **Gen Zers are specific and passionate about the issues that are important to them.** Criminal justice reform, racial justice, climate change, and student debt are at the forefront of this group's minds. If we push these issues in messaging, it can help boost enthusiasm to register and vote.
2. **There is a lot of frustration and anxiety among this cohort, largely caused by the federal government's response to the pandemic.** There is a strong desire for change in the federal government, both in Congress and in the White House. We can use this to drive turnout.
3. **Gen Zers are online now more than ever during this pandemic, and they can be reached on a multitude of social media platforms.** As long as the messaging is relatable and based in fact, we can find several different avenues to use in our communication strategy.

Here are three recommendations looking ahead:

1. **Choose your messengers carefully.** Gen Zers' social media feeds are already cluttered with ads. They won't listen to someone unless they already have some type of trust in that person or brand, and it needs to feel genuine – like the messenger believes what they are saying and doesn't have an ulterior motive.
2. **Focus on the issues - especially those related to social justice and equality - this is where Gen Z's passion lies.** This group is cynical about candidates and the political system in general, and they will not be convinced to go to the polls by candidates alone. They need to be convinced of real potential change on the issues that matter to them.

3. **Be informative and to the point.** Gen Z has hours and hours of social media content at their fingertips, but with this comes a relatively short attention span. They generally prefer to scroll past long posts, and they will weed through information that seems fake or lacks reliable sources. This group wants information, but they want to know they can trust it and they don't want to comb through unnecessary background to get to the point.