



Toward a Holistic Concept of Courageous Citizenship: Insights from Generation Z

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The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

This paper argues that young people's critiques of our current democratic republic may be less about young people's apathy and disengagement, and are more about their desire for new and different structures that empower young people for serious democratic engagement. In order to create a holistic concept of Courageous Citizenship, we need to take young people's critiques seriously and welcome new--even if challenging--ideas in order to ensure the survival of the republic for the next 250 years.

Since the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, young people have been deeply involved in defining and redefining how citizenship and civic virtue are practiced in America, and are consistently at the forefront of pushing the rest of the nation closer to the founding promise of a more perfect union. In fact, 18 of the 57 original signatories of the Declaration of Independence were [under 40 years old](#) in 1776. In addition, some of the most consequential founding fathers were young, including two of the three Federalist Papers' authors, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, who were both under 40 at the time of constitutional convention. Hamilton, in particular, was only 33 years old when the constitution was ratified in 1789.

If we fast forward to what African American Studies and Religion scholar, Eddie Glaude has called [“the Third Founding”](#) of America, or the fight for Civil Rights in the mid-twentieth century, young people again dominated the movement and were at the front lines of heralding in the next stage of building a courageous and more just society in America. People like the 21-year-old Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Chairman John Lewis, and the 29 year-old civil rights leader Hosea Williams led nearly 600 peaceful protesters from Selma to Montgomery in what became known as Bloody Sunday as they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Both the founders and those at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement were in search of a more inclusive and just form of American citizenship.

We find ourselves at another inflection point today in our country, yet the prospects for a courageous citizenship are somewhat blurred by the barrage of information that we receive about young people's faith in democracy. As we start to build out a vision for the type of courageous citizenship that will define the next stage in our democracy, it is important again to look to our young people, and draw our attention at their frustrations, but also the new ways they are imagining what the next 250 years could look like. The polling suggests several concerning trends, but if we look one level deeper to understand why these trends exist and what youth bring to civic engagement, we may be able to see a broader picture and gain insight into how we can leverage this transitory phase of our republic as one for renewing imagination. We may be able to cultivate more spaces and opportunities for youth to co-create our communities in order to transition into something that better fits the wholeness of our communities today and for the future.

In this paper, I will review some of the latest polling and research on the attitudes and perspectives of some of the youngest members of our republic, Generation Z, or those born between 1995-2010. These polling trends help us diagnose where Generation Z currently stand on attitudes of our currently democratic systems, opportunities, and leadership. Then, I'll offer

several examples and trends of current youth-led initiatives and civic engagement that can bring insight as we build out the next chapter of courageous citizenship in the United States.

Who is Generation Z and What do they Think About our Current Democracy?

America's Generation Z is most often defined by the group of people born between 1995 - 2010, or those between 16-31 years old today (in 2026). Some of the defining characteristics and experiences of Generation Z include that they are the most ethnically and racially diverse generation of Americans yet ([PRRI 2024](#)). They've experienced America's involvement in two, decades-long wars that have dominated headlines for most of their lives. They've grown up participating in school shooting drills (and in some cases, experienced shootings), and have lived through a period of increasing polarization, several economic crises and increasing economic inequality ([Pew Research](#)), they are natives to social media, and have experienced an increasingly fractured media environment.

Some might reflect that with all of this change and instability, it's no surprise that only 27% of Generation Z strongly agree that democracy is the best form of government, as the [McCourtney Institute at Penn State found in 2022](#). One might also find that it's no surprise that Generation Z is questioning whether or not our current institutions, and the American democracy they were born into will suffice for the current moment or help us with the complex problems our communities face. A survey conducted just after the 2024 elections by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, or CIRCLE, found that only [36% of those aged 18-29](#), agree or strongly agree that U.S. democracy today can address the issues currently facing the country. In that same study, only 16% agreed that democracy today is working well for young people.

Generation Z's skeptical perspectives are further supported when it comes to faith in our political processes and leaders in the highest federal offices. The most recent April 2026 [Harvard Youth Poll](#), which is a semi-annual survey of 18-29 year-olds' perceptions on American culture and politics, conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics found that only 33% of 18-29 year-olds trust that the 2026 midterm elections will be conducted fairly. In fact, an astonishing 43%--nearly half of those polled--say they are sure that elections *will not* be fair. And, the remaining 21% say they are unsure.

Young people's views of our current Congress do not fare much better when asked in the Harvard Youth Poll. Importantly, there is no real difference between perceptions based on political party either: Congressional Democrats and Congressional Republicans received a near-identical approval rating from Generation Z, at 26% and 25%, respectively.

This suggests that young people are not just frustrated with politics and our politicians, but they are frustrated with the mechanics of our democratic system as they currently operate. A recent SNF Agora Institute study from Johns Hopkins University found that [62% of Gen Z agreed/strongly agreed](#) with the statement, "Our nation's government needs significant changes no matter who we elect to represent us". By contrast, though, only 46% of those 65 or older said the same (8). The contrast suggests that what Generation Z citizens are pointing to is not just a

challenge to the people in power, but a challenge to the way the system operates, and are noticing something that Baby Boomers are less likely to care about.

Another contrast between Generation Z and Baby Boomers suggests that Generation Z is less entrenched in affective polarization than their older counterparts. While polarization registered relatively high for each generation in the Agora Institute study (over 30%), a majority (61%) of Baby Boomers agreed with the statement, “The opposing party is not just worse for politics-- they are downright evil”, [while only 39% of Gen Z agreed](#) (18).

This not only suggests that Generation Z has less animosity toward the opposing political party than those in the oldest generation, but that they are much more likely to be open to engaging with others across differences, which is an opportunity for building a more inclusive and courageous citizenship.

The Agora study’s findings also suggest that Generation Z has less affinity, connection, and confidence in political parties to be the primary paradigm or vehicle through which civic engagement takes place. For example, [nearly 50% of Generation Z does not affiliate](#) with a political party at all (5).

These findings, taken together, suggest that Generation Z is identifying stronger concerns with the way our current democratic structures operate, including how much young people are made to be a part of it. It also suggests that youth are willing to cast away (and are turned off by) some of the old paradigms for civic engagement and civic involvement than that which dominated previous generations, like political parties.

As a result, it may not be that Generation Z is less tied to democracy and citizenship overall, but rather they are frustrated with the current structures, mechanics, and vehicles for engagement as they currently exist. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. While young people may be less tied to traditional forms of civic engagement that used to help build social capital, connections, a sense of belonging, this opens a great opportunity for exploration of new ways of civic engagement that is needed for continued engagement.

While it’s easy to view several of the statistics presented above as concerning for the future of our democracy, a vision for courageous citizenship requires that we don’t simply lament these attitudes, but rather use them as important data points to inform a more comprehensive concept of courageous citizenship. If we listen deeply to the views of our youngest citizens, understand the deeper reasons why their perceptions exist, leverage the assets they bring, and understand what is working for some of our youngest members, we can better engage them, and move closer to a holistic concept of courageous citizenship that will be effective for the future.

Building Opportunities for Authentic Youth Leadership: Vote16 USA

Synthesizing the data above, it appears that Generation Z is calling for a review of our current systems and pushing for new ways of ensuring that they are part of the conversation. One area of change that has gained momentum in the U.S. recently has been in lowering the voting age to 16. While Takoma Park, MD was the first city to lower the voting age in municipal elections in the United States in 2013, international efforts to lower the voting age to 16 have been [taking place](#)

[since the 1970s](#). Countries like Austria and Brazil have allowed 16 year-olds to vote in elections since the 1980s. Germany has allowed youth to vote in local elections since the early 2000s, and most recently, this year, the United Kingdom voted to allow 16 year-olds to participate in all elections throughout the country.

Vote16USA's primary motivation for empowering youth to vote in school board and municipal elections is to instill faith and engagement in democracy even earlier and at a less transitory time in their lives than 18. They argue that this sends a message to 16-17 year-olds that their voice matters, especially in shaping their local communities. While there are diverging opinions about whether or not 16-17 year-olds *should* have the right to vote in local and state elections, for our purposes in this article the Vote16USA movement is significant because it is largely youth-led and directed. Youth are not just the recipients of enfranchisement, but they are co-creating the terms on which it is effected. While the central organization that supports campaigns and the movement across the country, Vote16USA, includes a national advisory board made up of a multi-generational group of educators, policy-makers, and advocates, the people designing and leading the specific campaigns at the local and state-level are [youth on the ground](#). Each state has a director of the state-wide campaign (most still in High School), who lead organizing efforts, lead and run communications between youth and government officials, and advocate directly to stakeholders. Youth are integral co-creators of the new enfranchisement policies that give young people the right to vote in their local elections, learning skills like communications, problem-solving, power mapping and organizing, and building the confidence to shape their rights in their communities.

There is also evidence to suggest that there is a compounded benefit as well on others who are not as involved to come out to vote. Evidence suggests that lowering the voting age to 16 appears to lead to the same or higher levels of engagement among 16-17 year-olds as the rest of the public. It appears changing the structure to allow young people to participate [leads even those youth not directly involved to participate](#) in their local communities' democratic decision-making. And, there is some evidence to suggest that 16-17 year-olds may be motivated to vote at higher rates than other parts of the population. For example, in Takoma Park--the first American city to give 16-17-year olds the right to vote in local elections saw a [69% voter turnout among 16-17 year olds in 2020](#), surpassing the perennially high turnout 65+ age group by 9 points. It appears that when youth are given a seat at the table and asked to change things, they may be more likely to believe in the efficacy of those elections.

Vote16USA illustrates part of a framework that CIRCLE developed for engaging and sustaining youth in civic leadership. CIRCLE's recent ["Building Political Homes" report](#) found that there are five components to a successful and sustainable place for Generation Z to build the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of civic life. Three of these components that make a strong "Political Home", according to CIRCLE are met with the Vote16USA approach. They are 1.) Places where youth can develop their voice, 2.) Places where they can develop their agency, gain skills and address real issues in their communities, and 3.) Places where they can develop skills for life and career. As mentioned above, Vote16USA's youth board is [full of teenagers who are founders or co-founders of their state's Vote16 organization](#). Vote16USA describes their youth

board in this way: “Young leaders don’t just advise, they shape the movement by ensuring that the voices of those most impacted are front and center in the fight for youth voting rights.”

In other words, while getting guidance from the national board and Executive Director, the central place where youth develop civic and work skills is in leading their chapters and we’ve seen this movement grow quite a bit since 2013. Here in the United States, currently there are 15 municipalities that allow 16 year-olds to vote in School Board and local elections, and there are currently campaigns in cities in half of the states.

Young People Want to Tackle Issues; They Care Less About Political Parties

Youth voting and youth involvement in the movement to lower the voting age are not just about giving young people the right to vote, but the Vote16USA movement represents a much more comprehensive sense of courageous citizenship, that includes skill development, education, knowledge development, and an opportunity to focus on a key issue that they care about, and not something that others tell them they should care about.

Stanford University Scholar Roberta Katz’s research found that characteristics of Generation Z also include that they are [diverse-minded and highly pragmatic](#), and are interested in solving problems. In addition, [half of Generation Z do not identify](#) with any political party (5). There are several reasons for this, but some include that youth often view political parties as [elitist, out of touch, and financially restrictive because of dues-payments](#) (4). Youth also view political parties as places where young voices are not set up to welcome them. While Generation Z is more turned off by political parties than previous generations, this does not mean that young people are not interested in working on issues in their communities.

While often seen as a retreat from politics, in a society that is increasingly polarized, the lack of strong affinity to a political party within Generation Z may be an opportunity for young people to practice the skills of co-creation with people across differences, unfettered by tribal affiliation so that they can focus on a civic issue they care about changing, which is an imperative component of successful democratic engagement for the most diverse generation in American history.

Research supports that civic experiences that are issue-focused lead to greater engagement and the stronger sense of long-term civic agency. In a joint 2025 study by civic advocacy organization, Protect Democracy and Tufts University’s CIRCLE called, “[How Does Gen Z Really Feel About Democracy?](#)”, one section of the study focused on finding the factors that lead to strong and sustained civic engagement of young people. While the study found that there were some differences among demographic groups, they concluded, “Young people’s democratic attitudes are defined less by their identities (e.g. race, gender, rurality, etc.) and more by *their experiences of civic development*: whether they have had the opportunities to develop civic skills like political efficacy, whether they trust civic institutions, and whether they participate in various civic actions. (my emphasis added).” This important finding suggests that there is a direct correlation between high quality, youth civic action experiences and an increase in youth civic attitudes and faith in democracy.

In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, students across the state are [required to conduct a student-led, real-world civics project](#) in Middle and High School as a graduation requirement. With the support of research and civic education organizations like Generation Citizen and the Democratic Knowledge Project--to name only two--as well as input from educators and researchers across the Commonwealth, the [2018 History and Social Science Framework](#) was designed and instituted to ensure that students would participate in an issue-focused project that occurs in their community. Schools that adopt [Generation Citizen](#)'s model have students go through a consensus-building process (an increasingly important civic skill) as a class, and decide on one topic to focus their civic action. From there, they conduct research--including participatory action research, they determine a root cause to the issue, identify decision-makers and influencers, and take action in their local civic and government spaces.

[Research suggests](#) that when it comes to working on local issues, people are much less partisan and willing to let partisanship get in the way of their ability to work together. Local communities also tend to be the place where most people feel the strongest sense of efficacy. This makes the local community the perfect place for young people to experiment, practice, and engage with issues they care about in order to build up their sense of civic efficacy. Massachusetts' framework is informed by research like this and the opportunity for young people across the Commonwealth to participate in a civic action project like this is an opportunity to both, get young people to learn the civic skills, knowledge, and motivation for courageous citizenship, and also appeal to what we know about youth inclinations to engage on issues rather than through their political parties.

Building the Conditions for Sustained Civic Engagement for Youth: Policies that Support Equitable Youth-led Civic Work

Massachusetts is not the only state in the country that supports stronger policies that appeal to Generation Z's inclinations for creating structural change, incorporate authentic leadership opportunities, and focus on issues-driven action. Several other states have adopted similar laws and policies. For example, in Rhode Island, the [Rhode Island Civic Literacy Act \(2021\)](#) includes a requirement that ensures that all public Middle and High School students participate in at least one student-led civics project in order to graduate.

Building the appropriate conditions for our younger generations to learn how to be civically engaged, in a way that appeals to their inclinations is an antidote and a way to harness the frustrations they are currently experiencing today. While there are some political challenges around implementing this type of civic experience, there is broad, bipartisan consensus [on the importance](#) of civic education to maintain our democratic society. Even when it comes to some of the [specifics](#) about how civics is taught, there is broad consensus across political leaning (Agreement Across the Aisle, 18), including learning how the US government works, learning reasons to vote, researching solutions to community-based problems, learning how to debate a topic from different viewpoints, and doing active service as part of classwork.

The [CivxNow coalition](#) is the largest cross-partisan civic education coalition, leading over 400 civic organizations in over 40 states to advocate for "bipartisan federal and state legislation that supports implementation of state and local policies that reimagine and deliver relevant,

inclusive, and engaging K–12 civic learning, both in- and out-of-school.” They have supported the passage of bills like the ones in Massachusetts and Rhode Island mentioned above, but also have advocated for recognition for active participation and civic engagement for youth called Civics Seals. Civic Seals are seals that will go on students’ transcripts to denote high proficiency in civics and civic engagement. To date, there are 9 states who recognize students for active participation in their communities in varied states across the country, including Kentucky, New York, California, and Arizona, and are building out other advocacy efforts in [four additional states currently](#).

Policies and laws at the local and state level also help to ensure that this kind of youth-led civic work and recognition exists and becomes supported for students across a community or across the state, no matter their background. [Research shows](#) that students from low-income backgrounds and students of color are much less likely to have access to high quality civics experiences where they can develop their own sense of agency, voice, leadership skills, and engage on the issues they care about most--all things that we know directly appeal to the youngest members of our constitutional republic, and can help us build a comprehensive form of courageous citizenship and imagination as we cross the threshold of 250 years in our experiment in self-government.

Conclusion

As we look beyond the 250th anniversary to imagine and co-create a new vision for courageous citizenship, we must include the perspectives, critiques, and the new ideas of our youngest community members in order for the vision to be sustainable. To reach and engage young people, we need to provide them with authentic opportunities to lead, to develop their skills, find their political homes to ensure they are architects alongside the rest of us as we envision the next 250 years. Supporting the conditions for young people to lead with older generations into new systems and structures can ensure we’re building a vision of courageous citizenship that is sustainable together.

This includes providing meaningful civic experiences that are focused on real-world, local issues that matter to young people, include their voices in shaping systemic changes to the mechanisms of government and inclusion, supporting policies that recognize and empower young people, and for us to be open to different paradigms for civic engagement.

If we do not set the right conditions, young people may be left searching elsewhere for belonging, participation, and meaning. I fear that without having a seat at the table, they may mistake their frustrations of our current conditions of our democracy for critiques of democracy itself, and be willing to explore other forms of government. The 2025 PACE Civic Language Study found that [46% of 18-24 year-olds said the term “authoritarian”](#) was neither positive nor negative when asked about civic-related words. This is a strong warning sign as well as an opportunity for us to invite youth in and co-create the next phase of our society together.

Like their forebears in the 18th and 20th centuries, Generation Z and youth, in general, are pushing for a more inclusive and stronger seat at the table, and we know that they want to have [an impact and](#) co-create this next chapter as we cross the threshold of our 250th anniversary. Let’s listen and create the conditions that make that possible.

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