

GEN Z'S EXPERIENCE WITH THE 2024 ELECTION THROUGH
PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS

by
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Gen Z has grown up amid school shootings, 9/11, the 2008 recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a media landscape defined by iPhones, social media, and algorithms. Now eligible to vote, they are stepping into the political sphere with unique lived experiences and media habits. This research asks: How does Gen Z experience and interact with politics, specifically during the 2024 US presidential election? While existing literature discusses polarization and the effects of algorithm-driven media, few studies center Gen Z's first-person perspectives. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach grounded in Walter Lippmann's theory of pseudo-environments, this study draws on 13 University of Oregon Gen Z students to understand how Gen Z constructs political meaning through media. Findings show that participants focus on issues affecting themselves and their circles, but definitions of those circles differ by party. Algorithms reinforce these preferences, creating distinct communication environments that inform how participants relate to politics and others. This contributes to polarization and is reinforced by broader political structures like the two-party system and figures like Donald Trump. Yet across party lines, Gen Z shares a desire for change and seeks younger, authentic leaders who prioritize people over elites. This study offers insight into how Gen Z navigates the current media landscape and what potential remains for future dialogue.

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Introduction

Gen Z, the most diverse generation to date, has known the world only to be tumultuous, strange, and full of technology.¹ For previous generations, there were airports before 9/11; a flourishing economy before 2008; safe schools before Sandy Hook; flip phones before Snapchatting; smoking cigarettes before vaping; activism before the BLM and #MeToo movement; and never having used Zoom before COVID. But for Gen Z, there isn't a "before." All of these historical and cultural events defined their growing up.

This generation, like many before, has had labels put on their work ethic and life motivations. They're entitled.² They're lazy. They're addicted to their phones. Their attention spans are short. They care about climate change.³ New research and studies are finding these to be not entirely accurate; Gen Z has more nuance than this.⁴ They're almost all grown up now, and their opinions are being cemented. And now, this generation can vote, so what does that nuance look like in terms of that vote? What motivates a generation with this intriguing past to cast their ballot? How does this unique generation perceive, interact with, and experience politics?

To impose a hypothesis on a generation constantly put in boxes of stereotypes would be a disservice and discredit to the complexities of their experiences. Before testing hypotheses, we must know what questions are even worth asking. Phenomenology solves this. It's a type of

¹ Dimock, M. (2019, January 17). *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. Pew Research Center; Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

² Gramont, G. (2023, October 4). *Debunking Gen Z stereotypes*. TorchLight Hire. <https://torchlighthere.com/debunking-gen-z-stereotypes/>

³ Loyst, M. (2023, September 10). *Fresh takes on climate change: The power of Gen Z perspectives in tech and venture capital*. Impact.economist.com. <https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/net-zero-and-energy/fresh-takes-on-climate-change-the-power-of-gen-z-perspectives-in-tech>

⁴ Denekas, S. (2023, December 6). *Attention brands: Gen Z is more nuanced than you think - DEPT®*. DEPT®. <https://www.deptagency.com/insight/attention-brands-gen-z-is-more-nuanced-than-you-think/>

research that gives a voice to its participants. It lets this generation tell the researcher what's important to know about their experiences, not vice versa.

“The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event. That is why until we know what others think they know, we cannot truly understand their acts.”⁵ That is, to understand Gen Z's behavior, we must understand how they perceive politics wholly. Through their answers, we can understand the image of politics in the mind of this generation, how that came to be, and how that informs their behavior.

Research Question

This study will seek to answer the central question: How do members of Generation Z experience and interact with politics—particularly in relation to the 2024 US presidential election?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand Gen Z's experiences with politics and the 2024 US presidential election. Phenomenology was chosen for its emphasis on lived experiences, making it well-suited to investigate how individuals perceive and engage with the political landscape.

Thirteen participants were recruited from the University of Oregon using snowball sampling. All participants belonged to Gen Z (i.e. born between 1997 and 2012) and were of legal voting age (i.e. 18 or older) during the 2024 presidential election. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in political views and voting behaviors to capture a wide range of experiences.

⁵ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Greenbook Publications, p. 9.

The study included three Republican-aligned Donald Trump voters (and those who intended to vote for him), one Independent-aligned intentional non-voter, eight Democrat-aligned Kamala Harris voters, and one Republican-aligned Kamala Harris voter.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to allow participants to reflect on and share their experiences and perspectives. Participants completed a short pre-interview survey, answering questions regarding three themes: political engagement, media consumption, and voting motivations. Informed consent was obtained immediately prior to each interview. Conducted in-person, each interview lasted around 30-45 minutes and focused on those same three themes. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency, while still allowing room for open-ended exploration.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive coding. Thematic analysis was guided by phenomenological principles, centering the participants' subjective meaning-making processes. Insights were then organized thematically based on recurring patterns in participant narratives. These themes were contextualized using existing literature on the intersection of mass media, politics, and public opinion. Each insight is supported with direct quotes from primary interviews and strengthened through comparison with relevant secondary and syndicated research.

Glossary for contextually dependent and relevant terms

Phenomenology: A qualitative research approach focused on understanding a phenomenon through the lived experiences of individuals. It emphasizes participants' own narratives and meaning-making processes without imposing predefined hypotheses or assumptions.

Gen Z: Typically refers to individuals born between 1997 and 2012. In this study, the term describes the 13 participants interviewed.

Overview of Mass Media and Politics

The rapid evolution of information technology has dramatically transformed the media landscape and redefined how individuals engage with politics. The rise of the internet created a new era of communication, blending traditional point-to-point and broadcast models into a simultaneous, interactive flow of information.⁶ Unlike in past systems, where only select gatekeepers had the power to disseminate messages widely, today, anyone with internet access can be both a sender and receiver of information.⁷ As a result, individuals now face an overwhelming surplus of content, ranging from little-known Reddit threads and TikTok creators to well-known institutions. All of these sources are simultaneously competing for the consumer's attention. By 2016, Americans were spending nearly as much time consuming news online as watching television. Nearly three-fourths of 18–29-year-olds specifically said they get their news from a smartphone or tablet.⁸ In 2024, among the same age group, 91% get their news at least sometimes from their digital devices and 46% from the TV.⁹ And when it comes to preference, 86% prefer their digital devices while only 8% prefer TV. Now that Gen Z consumes most of their news from their phones, they are living this shift.

The effects of this media transformation are debated. Optimists believe new media democratizes and revitalizes the public sphere, getting users direct access to diverse perspectives. Skeptics, however, warn that the internet encourages selective exposure and polarization. Shanto Iyengar, in *News That Matters*, highlights three hypotheses to explain how individuals may process political information in such a crowded media space. The attentive public hypothesis

⁶ Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (1987). *News That Matters*. University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (1987). *News That Matters*. University of Chicago Press.

⁸ Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. R. (1987). *News That Matters*. University of Chicago Press.

⁹ Pew Research Center. (2024, September 17). *News Platform Fact Sheet*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>

suggests that only those already interested in politics will seek out news, while others remain disengaged unless attention is demanded by major events. The partisan polarization hypothesis asserts that consumers gravitate toward information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs. Lastly, the issue public hypothesis proposes that people selectively engage with issues that personally matter to them, often based on lived experience or identity. Together, these theories explain how digital media enables both greater personalization and deeper polarization in political information consumption. Iyengar emphasizes that although the internet offers virtually infinite information, individuals are increasingly consuming content along partisan lines.

These theories—the attentive public hypothesis, partisan polarization, and issue publics—illustrate how today’s media consumers don’t just passively receive information. They must decide what information is worth their time, energy, and concern. In a world oversaturated with images and information, no individual could possibly consume it all. “No human being can see, hear, or read everything,” Cass Sunstein writes. “In the course of any hour, let alone any day, every one of us engages in massive filtering, simply in order to make life manageable and coherent.”¹⁰ That filtering is actually a logical survival mechanism. Behavioral science backs this up: paying attention to certain topics is effortful, and most people are wired to minimize that effort to conserve their attention.¹¹ This tendency to focus selectively—known as selective exposure—is foundational to how individuals navigate political content today. So what kind of filtering does Gen Z engage in? What do they pay attention to? Whose stories do they want to hear?

¹⁰ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press, p. 17.

¹¹ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press.

Insight 1: Gen Z pays attention to issues that affect them or their circle.

Introduction

Faced with a flood of political information, Gen Z has to decide what's worth caring about. And they determine this by relational and emotional relevance. That is, they care about issues that affect them personally or impact those whom they love. While this pattern is consistent across political lines, what differs is *who* they consider part of their circle and *what* they perceive as directly affecting their circle.

Findings

When speaking of motivators for their vote and top concerns during the 2024 presidential election, Gen Z continuously referred back to issues that affect them and/or those they care about.

“I mean, at the end of the day, it's selfish, but like, that is what it's important to me. It's like protecting myself and protecting the people that I love.” – Interview 9

“Politics is such a- a grand scheme of things. It would be impossible for one person to follow at all... I would say at the end of the day try to follow- this is me being biased. This is what I do. I'm not saying everyone should do this, because there's a lot more people who are a lot more humanitarian-based than I am. I would say try to follow politics that will directly affect you. If things don't affect you, you gotta consider how much worth fighting it's for.” – Interview 4

Although admitting some internal guilt, both parties pay attention to issues that affect them and whom they care about. However, the two parties differ in two key ways: first, in whom they consider part of their sphere of concern; and second, in which issues they believe affect them. This begs the questions: Who do they care about? What kind of people do they include in their sphere of concern? Who are they fighting and voting for?

Republicans' Sphere of Concern

Republicans are concerned about the American people and American tax dollars, wishing more power were given to the states than the federal government. This belief informs their opinion on foreign affairs; they believe American tax dollars should go towards benefiting American lives, not those from another country. Funding foreign affairs wouldn't result in the direct benefits they want to see in their local communities.

“When you take money away from the people and then put it in the government's hands, we can see that that's not always gonna end up in the right places as much as it can. And when you're thinking like we're sending all this money to Ukraine and the Ukraine and Russian conflict, imagine just more money was taken from the people and was sent there. How does that benefit us at all?” – Interview 4

“When Zelinski met with Trump, I was like, okay, I'm got I'm just giving this guy more money 'cause like, it is terrible what Russia is doing, but like, what Trump was saying, he's like, if we keep giving them money, then the war will continue, and he's like, I'm not pro either side. I'm pro ending it and finishing it. And it's not gonna end if we just keep funding it, which, like, isn't great because I feel bad for Ukrainians, 'cause, like, Russia is so much more powerful, but like, he also does have a point, like why're- it's like our money going towards this, like foreign affair. and like, especially, like, we give more money to them than, like, anyone in Europe. It's like, that should be like, they should be also contributing. It's not fair that we're the only ones contributing, so I was glad that he put his foot down about that.” – Interview 13

When speaking of the Ukraine and Russia conflict, both Republican individuals extended their support directly to American people and their tax dollars. They witness Republicans, and Trump specifically, as putting the American people first. This belief applies to immigration as well.

“It's more just that Trump is more America first. And is like, let's get less involved in foreign affairs and kind of focus more on us, um whereas, like, I feel like the Democ- Democrats, like, are much more willing and and like pushing for like, getting involved in foreign affairs. And it's like, nah, like, let's just stay out of that. Um and then, like, the border. same thing. I don't really think that's more if it kind of is more of ours, but I was like, it's more just like about, like, US security and USA first and like, I think the United States president his job or her job is to focus on America, not other countries, like focus on other countries when

we have our shit together, but, yeah, we don't, so yeah, I thought Trump would focus on the US more. If that makes sense.” – Interview 13

“I have no problem, like getting rid of, like, criminals. Um. and like that that's also another stereotype I don't like is that, you know, if you want secure borders, you just think everyone coming across is like, a terrorist or like a drug, like not everyone is, like that's so not true, but unfortunately, there are people doing that. and in order to just keep everyone safe and keep the process safe.” – Interview 13

Republicans are witnessing immigration as a problem and threat, and they believe the people affected are, yet again, the American people. That is whom Republicans view as part of their circle: Americans and American money. They view foreign affairs and immigration as threats to both.

Democrats' Sphere of Concern

Democrats overwhelmingly referenced women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ populations, and other marginalized communities as their sphere of concern. This often stemmed from close personal experiences with those communities.

“What I had a lot of focus on was like women's reproductive rights. And like, I live with four girls and like, I support them always and forever.” – Interview 9

“I have a lot of friends who belong to different marginalized communities, and I tend to keep up with the politics that affects them too, because I care so deeply about what happens to them and their families, especially when it comes to immigrants in America.” – Interview 2

These Democrats cared about the rights and lives of those with whom they've had close and personal connection. Whether they care about their female friends and their reproductive rights or they have personal connections with immigrants, these Democrats identify their sphere of concern as that of marginalized communities.

A bipartisan concern: the economy

Individuals on both sides of the political spectrum witnessed the current economy and the cost of living as impacting either their current or future lives. Being specifically in a university setting, they were worried about what life post-grad might look like. Two male republicans, one voting for Kamala Harris and the other intending to vote for Donald Trump, referenced their impending graduation as a motivator to prioritize the economy when voting. Looking forward to purchasing a home, a car, getting a family started, retiring, saving money, and getting a job were areas of concern.

“It definitely is something that concerns me, um, especially just, like, being about to graduate and it about to be like, you know, like I currently get support from my parents, but like, when I graduate, I'm not gonna have that.” – Interview 9

This data coincides with other Gen Z quantitative research—one study finding that the cost of living and inflation was by far youth voters’ top issue informing their vote.¹²

Very few people can escape the negative consequences of an unhealthy economy, and thus, both parties believed their spheres of concern to be affected by it. Therefore, both parties took the economy into consideration when voting. However, some people trusted the tariffs outlined in Donald Trump’s campaign, and others did not. That trust or lack thereof was a contributing factor in some individuals’ votes. One Republican man and one Democrat woman, both pursuing finance and economy-related studies, voted for Kamala Harris because of how they negatively perceived and understood these tariffs. Two Republicans, one who voted for Trump and another who had intended to vote for Trump, were open to Trump’s idea of the tariffs, saying it might work in due time and trusting the process.

¹² Medina, A., Siegel-Stechler, K., & Suzuki, S. (2025, January 15). *Young People and the 2024 Election: Struggling, Disconnected, and Dissatisfied*. Tufts.edu. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/2024-poll-barriers-issues-economy>

This is not to say that everyone cared about the economy, however. In fact, some individuals don't understand the economy nor care about it, and they care more about other social issues. This perspective was present in both parties.

“When I think about politics, normally I'm not so focused on, like the economy, just because like, I don't feel like I truly understand it. Like, I am more focused on like the human rights aspect of it and just, like, the climate and just like what we're doing to the planet. um but yeah, I mean, I didn't vote for a Kamala, like for her, like, economic plan. um, and in all honesty I didn't really know much about her economic plan. And I kind of didn't care.” – Interview 9

“I would say anything to do with the economy, I am completely lost. Tariffs, that it just doesn't- And this sounds horrible, but it doesn't interest me because I just don't understand it. Like, so that- I would not say that I'm I would never claim to be knowledgeable. Um, but women's health and reproductive rights is to- obviously because I'm- that's something that personally affects me is something I'm very very interested in and passionate about.” – Interview 6

“Economy, numbers? No, like, I don't understand any of that, but, like, when it comes to what, like, social issues, I think that's what I pay more attention to. Not that, like it will necessarily, like, affect me. It just kind of like affects our society in a way, and like the soci- society that we're living in.” – Interview 13

People who don't understand the economy then do not vote for it; they opt for other issues that they witness as directly affecting their sphere of concern.

Change: both sides want it

In terms of issues affecting their spheres of concern, Republicans and Democrats alike voted for a change of pace. What did they believed needed changing? They both wanted society to be bettered, but how they define “society” and “betterment” is based on their spheres of concern.

Democrats wanted society bettered namely through benefitting minority groups, unhoused people, women, and climate change. Voting for Harris signified that both in terms of policy and her own identity as a woman of color being represented in the White House.

Republicans wanted to go back to a time when the economy was better and before the extremist left agenda felt overbearing and rigid. Thus, they voted for Trump.

“What's gonna get the Republicans to vote for you is like thinking that you're offering a different narrative to what their lived experiences, and they're not seeing that. Like, they're not they're not thinking that your economic plan is what's gonna save their life. What they're seeing with Trump is that they're seeing a difference and a change that he's offering them. He's offering them something that's not what was happening before, and the Democrats need to offer something that's not what was happening before. Like they, this country is itching for radical structural change and the Democrats haven't been able to communicate that they can deliver that too. It's just the Republicans who are able to deliver the radical structural change based in culture wars. Which is crazy frankly, but it's like they're communicating that they're gonna change your life way better than the Democrats are communicating that they're gonna change your life.” – Interview 2

This female Harris-voting Democrat believed too that Republicans wanted change, and she recognized that Kamala Harris did not signal that for them. Both parties are dissatisfied and want cultural, radical change in their current environment. Whether or not they could see those candidates as agents of that change for their circles dictated their votes.

Conclusion

Caring most about the people closest to you isn't selfish. It's logical. In a world of endless and pressing issues, Gen Z filters their attention through personal experience and emotional proximity. Whether they define their community as a nation or a group of friends, their political attention reflects the instinct to protect what's near. It represents both the partisan politics and issue publics hypotheses described by Iyengar. They care about what personally affects them, but what affected them and their circle is correlated with their political affiliation.

Insight 2: Gen Z witnesses media bias.

Introduction

People pay attention to people they care about, focusing on issues that affects themselves or their close circles. In today's fragmented media landscape, this attention is filtered in multiple layers—first by personal interest, then by algorithms, and finally by partisan storytelling. This creates a feedback loop of individuals seeking out media that aligns with their values, algorithms detecting and reinforcing these preferences, and the divide between different audiences continually growing wider.

Nicholas Negroponte's concept of *The Daily Me* imagined a future where individuals could curate their own news, selecting only the topics and viewpoints that interested them—whether it be sports, friends, or politics—allowing each person to be “fully in charge of what we see and hear.”¹³ This model assumes active control and personal agency but also represents an architecture of control that increases the likelihood of homophily—the tendency to surround ourselves with people and ideas that mirror our own. As Sunstein wrote, it seems natural to avoid topics that bore us and perspectives we despise.¹⁴

Once imagined, *The Daily Me* is now our present. But today's version goes beyond personal choice. Algorithms and hashtags create *The Daily Me* for us. And we don't even know exactly how. They track our likes, follows, shares, screenshots, and screen time to shape a feed that knows what will hold our attention. It knows what you like better than you do, and our feeds will continuously feed us content tailored to our preferences, deepening the echo chamber effect. Algorithms both reflect the preexisting interest of people and engage in a form of agenda-

¹³ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press.

setting—highlighting certain people, topics, and viewpoints that tell consumers not what to think but what to think about (source from class).

Walter Lippmann's theory of the pseudo-environment, outlined in *Public Opinion* (1922), helps explain how media's images form individuals' beliefs, opinions, and behavior. Lippman explains that people do not respond to the world as it is, but to the mental images shaped by media, rhetoric, and social context. These simplified and often distorted "pictures in our heads" guide public opinion often more than direct experience.¹⁵ This shows how media environments construct and limit our understanding of the world.

Findings

Catered Media

Across interviews, Gen Z participants described their interactions with catered media, echo chambers, and polarizing rhetoric. Participants were highly aware of algorithms and bias. Differing sides witnessed different stories that related to their preexisting concerns and validated them.

"I feel like my level of understanding comes from a very, like algorithm based um like insight, I guess. Like I I know for a fact that excuse me, what I engage with online gives me certain, like, political information, I guess. Um rather than me actively seeking it, I feel like it's something that I'm shown instead of like me looking for. Like my phone gives me the things to pay attention to." – Interview 12

"I saw, like in New York, they had like there were like 12, like kids that were like under eight years old, that were like in court, alone, and were being asked to leave the US 'cause their parents had already been deported and the kids, like, they're without lawyers and, like, they're scared. Like, they don't know what's going on. Um and uh yeah, I don't know, but I like I I don't know that those things are typically covered in the mainstream media." – Interview 9

¹⁵ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Greenbook Publications.

Um and, you know, I've seen a lot of news lately of like that, like ICE is like going around neighborhoods and they're like dressed, you know, like as like normal people, just in like everyday clothes and, you know, like even like students at UO who are being asked to leave the country, um so, yeah.” – Interview 9

Echo chambers

As information gets filtered through partisan media and social networks, individuals come to believe their perspective is widely shared. Their media creates their pseudo-environment, which they believe is their real environment. In this sense, Gen Z participants are living out a version of Plato’s Cave—consuming content in isolated spheres, mistaking the shadows for reality. Participants recognized that what their media shows them is catered to them, but it becomes difficult to know the world beyond their pseudo-environment. These echo chambers function as entirely “different communications universes.”¹⁶ Participants recognized and expressed their frustration at this pattern.

“I was so caught off guard when Kamala didn't win, because I just everything I was seeing was like, everyone feels the same as me. And they in fact did not feel the same as me, which was a shocker.” – Interview 9

“I really believed she was gonna be president, too, was the crazy thing. And I don't know if that's because I'm in my echo chamber of like, liberals who are so far left, they kind of hate liberals. You know? But I really thought she was gonna be our next president and I was gonna feel so proud to be American with her leading us.” – Interview 2

Gen Z witnesses rhetoric present in the media

Pussies. Snowflakes. Devils. These are just some of the words flung across the political divide—labels used to reduce people to caricatures based on party affiliation. And if you start to believe those labels, or believe others are using them against you, you might not feel safe engaging in conversations with them.

¹⁶ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press, p. 25.

Social media and algorithms now act as an extension of our inner circles. Once you engage with a particular type of content, your algorithm takes note—and keeps feeding you more of the same. It rarely shows you what you haven't already shown interest in. This digital curation shapes your understanding of the world. You might begin to see messages like urging some black-and-white message and internalize that as truth. Democrats may withdraw from dialogue, believing Republicans hate the people they love. Republicans, in turn, grow defensive, feeling wrongly vilified. Even without real-life conversations, both sides build entire narratives about each other—stories based not on experience or discussion, but on algorithms, headlines, and the images that flood their feeds.

“Both parties paint the other out to be the demon and obviously with just about every political issue, both parties take complete opposite stances and say that if you do not align with them, you are morally wrong, you're a bad person. Both ends care you don't, claim you don't care about human life. Like, both like, both political parties just work so much to demonize each other that that also, like, I said, really contributes political polarization, because then the members of their parties then internalize that and, all, and that, like, I know so many Democrats who just like they're like, oh, if they are Republicans, they're bad. Blanket statement, all Republicans are bad.” – Interview 1

“We have we have this advent of, you know, social media and this ability to know so much more about the world and to be able to see it with our eyes, and we've chosen to continue to hate people without knowing them when we have this ability to literally call someone up or like, even just like make an online friendship with someone from that place, it's just it's so crazy to me. Like, we're living in this globalized world, and you don't know a single person from this country and you're able to stereotype them all, or you able to start a whole culture war about them? It really pisses me the hell off.” – Interview 2

“It's like only bad news makes headlines, and then people form opinions on entire ethnic groups based on that. And that's not unlike what's happened throughout all of human history. Like, there's always gonna be mass generalizations made in media. It's very hard to put nuance in a headline. But I think with the infographic age, I find that people are able to make really simplistic statements about complex things and then people really run with it nowadays. Like, more so than they used to, which I'm, I am hesitant to say because I wasn't around back then. I've only really known this political atmosphere.” – Interview 2

“It feels as if sometimes it's one party and their goal of media is to just sometimes bash the other party. And it's not even just one to the other. I feel it's, I feel like it's like that on both ways.” – Interview 4

“There is something that feels different about being in this social media age, because people are consuming more information than humans were ever meant to have in their brains. And people are making insane opinions now that are not rooted and interacting with real people. They're rooted and interacting with the screen. And that is really bad.” – Interview 2

“Very much so, I think there's partisanship in American news media. I think it's terrible. I think it completely jeopardizes the whole idea of free press and freedom of speech. It, partisanship in our media only further contributes to partisanship within the political culture of America. It's only furthering to contribute to the like, destruction, almost, of our government and how like partisanship has become such a huge thing in American politics and it is the very reason that our government is so nonfunctional, so many people don't trust our government, like, all of the issues that we have in American politics today can be traced back to just the severe partisanship that we have within our country and the news also having that is not helping. It's making its own choice. Like it actually, cause because then people who are far, it's the same for the far left and the far right. People who have those extreme opinions are then able to go to new sources who are validating those opinions and they are able to say, you know, I believe x, y and z because Fox News told me to, or because whoever told me to. And it's like, it's just perpetuating the problem.” – Interview 1

Conclusion

Gen Z is not passively consuming media; they are engaging with feeds that reflect and reinforce the people, issues, and identities they care already care about. What begins as this personal interest becomes amplified through algorithms and partisan storytelling, shaping a pseudo-environment that feels real. Participants recognized the role of catered media in affirming their worldview, some acknowledging efforts to actively seek out the opposing opinions while others believing they know enough. Both responses acknowledge the two partisan sides of the media. Now we must think about how these differing communications universes and pseudo environments inform the way people interact with each other in their real lives.

Insight 3: Media bias is creating division and extremism.

Introduction

Gen Z knows the news is a business. They understand that headlines are tailored for clicks and that stories are often framed for partisans. This bias is now a regular feature of the media. But even with that awareness, no one's immune to the effect. Lippman wrote that "men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities," and Gen Z is no exception.¹⁷ Young voters are reacting to their reality of American politics and people constructed through images and rhetorics they see in the media. They are responding to a version of the world they've never directly experienced. The problem is that "whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself."¹⁸ That belief drives behavior like polarization and noncommunication—actions that play out in the real world with real consequences, even if the original stimulus came from a screen. "To that pseudo-environment his behavior is a response. But because it *is* behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates."¹⁹ In other words, even if what you're reacting to is simply media images and rhetoric, the responses you have to it, if made in the real world, have tangible and cultural consequences. The danger is thinking you know enough when you've never spoken to someone of that group, never questioned the narrative, and never stepped out of your feed.

¹⁷ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Greenbook Publications.

¹⁸ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Greenbook Publications, p. 2.

¹⁹ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. Greenbook Publications, p. 10.

Findings

Gen Z overwhelmingly commented on the characteristics that define political culture today—namely, aggression, tension, black-and-white morality, extremism, and hatred. Whether or not they participate in this culture themselves, they crave change. They’d rather a world where they can reach across the aisle, have productive chats with their neighbors, and learn. But at the University of Oregon, a school they described as very progressive, conversations like this are rare.

Extremism, hatred, and polarization

Echo chambers and curated feeds shape what people see, who they trust, who they fear, and who they believe is on their side. As Sunstein writes, if “like-minded people [to] stir one another to greater levels of anger,” the results can be dangerous extremism.²⁰ The feedback loop of partisan media and algorithmic reinforcement makes it harder to see nuance and easier to not understand those with opposing views. The result is what Sunstein calls “partyism”—a visceral, automatic distrust of the other side. In 1960, only 5% of Republicans and 4% of Democrats said they would be displeased if their child married someone from the opposite party. By 2010, those numbers jumped to 49% and 33% respectively. While it would be too simple to blame the rise of partyism solely on the internet, there is little doubt, as Sunstein notes, that “a fragmented media market is a significant contributing factor.”²¹

Participants echoed this growing divide, often describing politics as unfairly black and white with no middle ground or discussion of the alternative.

²⁰ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press, p. 10.

²¹ Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *Republic Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton University Press, p. 10.

“It feels like when you ask most people, the amount of people who are gonna say, I'm a 100% percent Kamala follower through and through, or I'm a 100% Trump follower through and through, are a lot smaller margins, actually, than what the media like depicts. And it's actually people more so choosing sometimes I want this person because I don't want the other person.” – Interview 4

“There's only the two parties, and there's not any, um diversity or open mindedness. It's black and white, you're a Republican, you're a Democrat, and based on that, I'm either going to talk to you if you're in my party, or I'm not going to talk to you about it at all, and we're just not gonna have any conversations about that. And that's I think really dangerous and scary because people, like, where is the growth in that? Like, there's not.” – Interview 6

“I think I'm guilty of it too, but I I really hope for us as a country to simmer down a little bit, listen. Um, I don't think everything is so black and white. I don't think one side is completely right, and one side is completely wrong. I think the far right and the far left are both very problematic, and I think everyone kind of just needs to like, like be willing to, like, get out, like, move towards the middle-ish, like, compromise, or try to at least understand.” – Interview 13

“There definitely is a hate that has come, and I am so guilty of it. Like, I have a lot of honestly, yeah, like hate for people that voted for Trump. Um. and, you know, I know that there's a lot of hate just generally, like, in this country right now. Um like hate for people of color, hate for the LGBTQ community. Um hate of like a woman even, and I feel like a lot of that is a product of politics, and yeah, putting people onto these, like, you're on this team and you're on this team. I mean, if you're in a team, you're trying to win and you're fighting and you got kind of battle.” – Interview 9

Have Democrats become too woke for even Democrats? Or are they not doing enough?

These are not inherently incompatible. It appears both Democrats and Republicans are not satisfied with the culture laid out by left-learning individuals. Too judgy, too morally black-and-white, and full of no real action or results.

“My Jewish circles are like getting so jaded by activism because so many activists are like all Jewish people think X,Y, Z, X,Y, Z, X,Y Z. And then when Jewish people, like, do fall in line with some of the actives and things, but not everything, they still don't pass, like the moral purity test of these activists, and it's just like a vicious cycle of people not understanding or wanting to understand why we think different, because they instantly write it off as morally incompatible.” – Interview 2

"Just I think on every side there is just an overlying attitude of judgment, like, even within the party and, like, you're not- it's just, I feel like a lot of times,

especially being white, I feel like there's a lot of people trying to, like, prove, like, they're like- people because a lot of- my people in my circle are like me, um, why heterosexual, like, of the dominant group. Um, and I think there's, with that, there's a big undertone of, like, proving, having to prove how much of an ally LGBTQ or how an ally to Black rights and all of that. I think that's kind of an undertone.” - Interview 6

This culture lacks acceptance of differing opinions. People feel they must pass this impossible cultural “moral purity test,” which disappoints Gen Z.

“Um, I feel like one of the things that can frustrate me about people who are like extremely like liberal or Democrat is hate for law enforcement. I have grown up in a like military law enforcement family my whole life. um I want to be a cop. um I just feel like that's something that like I wish was I wish it was different. Um, I feel like me obviously like studying social work and stuff and um you know, family and human services will make me do like better work in that field and improve it slightly. But I- that's the one thing that I don't really like resonate with is I feel like the party doesn't really like cops and that's that's kind of like a hard thing for me. um at times, just because obviously like I'm biased and I have like emotional ties to that.” – Interview 12

“I think the left had gone too far left for me. Um. especially with, like, Kamala's history in California. um, and also Tim Walz's history, I was just like, that's like a little too far left for me, like, and maybe she wouldn't have done any of that stuff. I don't know, but, like a lot of her, like, like, people were like like she wanted to, like, fund sex changes in prisons, and it was like, what? Like, that's not an issue, we need to be focusing on right now, and, like, the whole tampons in the men's bathrooms, I'm like, like, what, like, this shouldn't be like your like, I don't know, I felt like a lot of their issues were very, like virtue signally, um, not like, issues that are affecting everyday Americans. Like, I think I think, like, the thing about her is that, like, she was very much like about social issues, and I think that's something that like, you're privileged to worry about that, if you're not worried about feeding your family. If you're not worried about, like, getting fired from your job, like, whereas like Trump, I feel like focused more on like, you know, everyday issues, whereas she was, like, very, like, idealistic, like, we're gonna make the society better. I'm like, okay, but, like, people over here who, like, can't pay their bills, like, they don't care about that.” – Interview 13

“I think they need to simmer down on the, you know, like, identity politics. um, that's one thing that's kind of always bugged me. I'm like, okay, why is someone just because they're black or just because they're gay or whatever? Like, you have to vote for me. Like, that shouldn't be your thing. like, you should be like, this is what I am going to do for the American people. and, like, they're much more like focused on, like, specific groups. So I could think if they just, like, tried to, like, appeal to like not just like minority groups, if that I like that kind of sounds bad, but I'm like like, why can't you just let them be individual and make decisions, not be like, oh, you have to vote for me because I'm the party that, like, supports you,

or whatever, you know what I mean? ...It's like, you should just let these people be individuals and not have their vote be dictated just by the color of their skin or their sexual orientation. Like, that's something I that I would like to see, um, change.” – Interview 13

This morally black-and-white culture deepens polarization as well. When political identities are framed as righteous or irredeemable, people are less likely to engage with opposing views. This moral rigidity discourages dialogue and reinforces confirmation bias, as individuals retreat into like-minded spaces both online and offline—where their beliefs are affirmed rather than challenged. As participants described, conversations are increasingly confined to these echo chambers or avoided entirely, not necessarily out of apathy but because political disagreement feels personal, high-stakes, and often unresolvable.

Political Conversations

Conversations regarding politics are nonexistent, confirming bias, or aggressive. Productive conversations, although possible, are rare. Acknowledging the stubbornness of themselves and those with whom they disagree, some choose to stay silent to avoid these tension-filled conversations. Instead, they turn to groups of people they know will agree with them.

“Um, I usually stay pretty quiet, um just ‘cause I don't like confrontation, and like, I'm like, you know what? You have your views, I have mine, I'm not gonna change our mind. Like, I think we're both pretty, like, you know, what we like, you know, yeah, if it's like, I'm sure you've heard the other side and, like, we both have our opinions and that's fine.” – Interview 13

“I feel like politics is something that some people like don't like to talk about. And they don't like to hear other people's opinions on it. And I think that's a really big issue. Um, because it's kind of become this, like silent, like, you talk about it internally with people who agree with you, and then it's a confirmation bias of your own opinions, and you don't get to hear as much differing opinion.” – Interview 3

“I love having really open-ended conversations, but those are really, I feel, hard to come by and you have to be really careful who you have them with I feel like nowadays... without finding- some- it's really rare, I feel like to find someone to confide in about that that's, like, going to actually listen and respect where you're coming from and not get incredibly defensive about their own views. Because people are upset and defensive.” – Interview 6

Non-productive conversations are both a mirror and a consequence of the images Gen Z has in their heads. Media constructs culture, and culture constructs media, and so-on.

“I think that there are 100% people that can have those productive conversations with one another, even when they disagree. um but the current state, like, makes it really hard to do that. I think for a lot of people, just because I feel like there is such a lack of empathy on one end, and then a lack of understanding on the other end. Um and it's hard to come to that understanding when it feels like there is just morals involved and people don't wanna sacrifice their morals. I don't wanna sacrifice my morals. And I- I'm the type of person that will like stick up for my morals...It does it makes it so difficult, and then you do look at these people in your life and you you do question their morals. And you do look at them and you and like, like I think I'm like, how how could you do this? And how do you look at what is going on now and you still can justify your vote for him?”

“I want, like, reproductive rights, and I want my right to marry, and I want the right to people to be able to live here without fear. And, like, and as long as they can also understand that, and can, like, be okay with me holding that view, and hopefully with them understanding that that is important, then I can have that conversation with them. if that mutual respect isn't there, though, fucking guns on the table, like, I'll- we'll tear each other to bits, that's fine, yeah.” – Interview 9

One participant expressed deep frustration with what they described as “tribalism”—a mindset where trust and understanding are confined to those who share one’s identity or background. From this, this instinctual “skepticism of the Other” was not only socially corrosive but also a missed opportunity for meaning connection.

“Tribalism is, I'm not even sure if I'm gonna define this perfectly, but it's this idea that only your crew can understand you ... or it's like the only people that are able to listen to me with an open mind are the people that come from my background. Or I'm only gonna exist with it- within this community because nobody else is looking out for me with a good intentions. It's this, like, innate skepticism of the Other, which I so reject as we've talked about previously. It really frickin' pisses me off. In this world, where you have the opportunity to be each other's neighbor,

and you're choosing to reject that in the name of tribalism, what the hell are you doing with your time?" – Interview 2

This sentiment illustrates a broader discontentment with the emotional and moral rigidity of political discourse—where community is built on sameness rather than dialogue, and deviation from group norms is often met with distrust.

On One Team

Despite the polarization, both parties expressed that they wish the circumstances were different. They wished for community.

"When you have a time where 50% of the US doesn't like someone, um that should be also a time for you, like, even though you might agree with them, kind of take a step back and think, like, all right, like we got all- we're all on the same team here. It shouldn't feel like there's a divide in the country. Especially, we the people. It's not us the people, and them the people, it's we the people." – Interview 4

"Yeah, and just coming into it of a place of like, we're all this is gonna sound really hippie and- Just we're all regardless of what party like we are just all going through- No, I don't think anyone's happy with the government right now of any side. Like so I think we're all struggling together, and there needs to be a level of empathy for people just living the same experience- life, we're living. You know?" – Interview 6

"We're on earth here to share experiences with one another to make friends, to share experiences. But for some odd reason, people think that it's more important to disagree with one other because somebody doesn't support abortion or somebody does support abortion. Or across many other issues. It's just sad that we can't we can't just look at each other as people and not a set of beliefs, you know?" – Interview 8

"If they, if they practiced not even what they preached, if they just if they just, committed to loving their neighbors, I really do think that would heal America. And it just sucks that our, that so many of our politicians in our new sources, in our medias, and everything is so, profits on us, hating each other, hating our neighbors, not getting to know our neighbors and assuming what our neighbors think." – Interview 2

Conclusion

These perspectives speak to how people's constructed mental images dictate who belongs, who is safe, and who they can speak to. As Lippman argued, we navigate the world not by direct knowledge but through the images in our heads, which act as mental shortcuts shaped by media and social cues. Tribalism then becomes a mechanism for reinforcing those internal pictures. The in-group is seen as trustworthy and rational, while the out-group becomes a monolith of misunderstanding and malice. Polarization emerges not just from disagreement but from these hardened and cemented mental images. In this closed loop, confirmation bias seeks agreeable information and protects partisan identity and safety. Although they engage in it, they aren't necessarily happy about it. They acknowledge the wasted potential of living in a connected world while clinging to their preconceived notions of division. What was once just polarized media now informs a polarized culture of aggressive or nonexistent conversations and tribalism.

Insight 4: They blame division on Donald Trump and the two-party system.

Introduction

In a pseudo-environment shaped by media and perception, nuance gets flattened. There's no grey area—only left or right, us and them. This black-and-white worldview exists both in the pseudo-environment and real political cultures and conversations. And it's reinforced by the very real two-party system that structures US politics and by polarizing figures like Donald Trump, who exist simultaneously in the symbolic and physical environments.

Findings

Participants expressed how these forces make moderation feel impossible and force them to take a side.

Donald Trump

Many Democrats were voting not just for Kamala Harris but also specifically “to keep Trump far as fuck away from our country” (Interview 13).

“I I hate him. I I I really fucking hate Donald Trump. Sorry. Literally just talking about him. pisses me off, but that that's also another motivator is like I I do not want this person in office.” – Interview 13

“I think it was at the end of the day, like, absolutely he cannot come, be back in office, but it also was looking at those two people, and then seeing her as somebody that, like, I definitely aligned with, and that I definitely think would do a good job.” – Interview 3

And similarly, one Republican noted his discontent with Trump's divisive language and campaigning.

“I don't want a president who's also equally creating tension. With, with, amongst the people. I don't want that. So that's what- another reason why I didn't vote. You shouldn't be, you shouldn't be trying to light a fire under the other side's ass, like it should be it should be trying to unite, not divide” – Interview 4

In these comments, Trump is more than just a candidate or president; he's a symbol of division. These participants resisted someone who, in their eyes, embodied extremism.

Two-party system

For many Gen Z participants, the two-party system felt similarly polarizing. Rather than offering a spectrum of beliefs, the binary structure felt restraining. They felt that it forced ideological commitments and created antagonism between the two parties.

“The two party system... well, I mean, it puts people in a like into a box. It's like you either have to be this, or you have to be this. And then it's like, if you're gonna vote for another party, I'm like, you're practically throwing your vote in the trash, because unfortunately, you're never gonna see a red or blue not win, and maybe never say never, but like, it like, yeah, pretty much never. um and you know, and and that is like what I dislike about it. It's like, I I don't like that you have to have this, like, one side or the other kind of view, where it's like both sides have taken, like, more radical stances. and like, there is no middle ground. um, and it just, like creates a lot of division in the entire country. I'm like, it like, it like it creates hate, like, for the other side.” – Interview 9

“I don't like, very strong labels and boxes, and I think it's very demanding of you knowing exactly who you are and exactly what you want, and that's not really like- it's not really feasible. Like, no no one, especially in our generation knows exactly who they are or exactly what they want. It's all about learning and growing. And I think that's an attitude that needs to be held with views on things as well. And I try- I just wanna- I feel like I can't be at the farthest end of either spectrum and still keep open-minded this.” – Interview 6

Together, these quotes reflect Gen Z's frustration with the rigid binary of the two-party system. Participants felt boxed into political identities that don't feel room for personal growth, nuance, or uncertainty. They feel the current system discourages open-mindedness and conversation and view it as socially divisive and emotionally draining.

Conclusion

The polarization and extremism from the media and Lippmann's pseudo-environments are cemented into culture and then further reinforced in the real world via the two-party system

and divisive figures like Donald Trump. Participants' frustration shows how sources in the real environment—our own conversations, political figures and structures, etc.—and in the pseudo-environment—mental images dictated by the media—work in tandem to limit the possibility for nuance and dialogue, further entrenching the polarization and extremism felt by Gen Z.

Insight 5: Gen Z has similar visions for their ideal candidate.

Introduction

Lippman’s concept of pseudo-environments provides a lens to understand how Gen Z navigates political discourse both online and offline. These constructed realities—shaped by selective exposure, algorithms, and social circles—inform how individuals perceive political issues and engage with across and within party lines. However, despite these fragmented media worlds, Gen Z shares similar wants, needs, and hopes for a political candidate. And specifically, recent research from CIRCLE shows a widespread dissatisfaction with political candidates.²² Among voters aged 18-34, nearly a quarter (24%) said they did not like any of the candidates, while 20% said voting simply wasn’t important to them. While Gen Z may define “change” differently depending on party affiliation, this shared discontent reflects a deeper disconnect between political candidates and Gen Z’s lived experiences and pseudo-environments.

Findings:

Mixed feelings and discontentment

Similarly to CIRCLE’s findings, this study’s participants had varying levels of satisfaction with the two candidates. The Republicans interviewed expressed discontent for Trump, whether they voted for him or not. Democrats had some contrasting experiences, some

²² Medina, A., Siegel-Stechler, K., & Suzuki, S. (2025, January 15). *Young People and the 2024 Election: Struggling, Disconnected, and Dissatisfied*. Tufts.edu. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/2024-poll-barriers-issues-economy>

who loved Harris and Walz and others expressing dissatisfaction with their ties to the Biden administration.

“This past election, I think we had two terrible options. Um, I don't really like either. I trust Trump more than I do with Kamala, just because she was so tightly tied with the Biden administration and she would say I'm gonna change, but I'm also, oh I'm proud of what I did, and then it was like shitty, so I was like, but then Trump is just fucking Trump. Like, he's just kind of an idiot. Um, and he like should watch his mouth a lot more than he does. um so yeah, I'd like to see a younger, more well-tempered candidate.” – Interview 13

“I didn't love either candidate, obviously don't love Trump. OBVIOUSLY. But just Kamala Harris, like I felt like, she wasn't a strong candidate. She hadn't taken enough time to promote herself and to do her candidacy in the media because she had such a short period of time to do it. I just felt that there was no real hope for her.” – Interview 1

“I loved Kamala Harris, but I think she wasn't able to, like, communicate that she was gonna try her best to change people's lives. In the way that she needed to to win. But she ha- she was given an impossible task. She had two months to win an election, basically, and to get the country to respect her after being part of such an unpopular administration. She was really given an impossible task.” – Interview 2

“I didn't necessarily think she was bringing a ton of new ideas, but I definitely think she had the priorities, her priorities straight in that setting and it touched on a lot of certain aspects that were important.” – Interview 3

These mixed reactions ranged from reluctant support to outright dissatisfaction to deep admiration, reflecting the complex emotional landscape among Gen Z voters. While some felt politically cornered, others expressed real excitement or hopefulness about the candidates. Still, across the board, even positive sentiments were met with concerns about messaging, party baggage, or lack of time to build trust. This blend of optimism, skepticism, and dissatisfaction aligns with CIRCLE's findings. Gen Z wants change, but they don't always see it clearly reflected in their options. So who does Gen Z want in their candidates? What qualities are important to them?

Young

Everyone agreed that they need younger candidates—people who understand the needs of today and are in tune to this generation.

“In general, we just need younger people and politics. And it just, it baffles me that, like, there are so many really old people who are still in politics, and the younger generation, we’re getting spoken for. So I think that that is something huge that needs to change, because they- I don’t- it frustrates me so much to hear, like, 70 year old and 80 year olds seating issues that don’t even aren’t even gonna impact them.” – Interview 3

“So I think in that sense, like having someone under 70 being in office, um who’s not a man and who’s not white would have been awesome. And I think it just could have been, like a really good step in the right direction.” – Interview 3

“I think someone who would be super excited for- about voting would be younger. I feel like everyone is so fucking old and younger people are starting to take more power, so I think it would be really refreshing to see someone younger, actually, like, 35, right is the age? So, like, someone just not fucking 80.” – Interview 5

“It was an upgrade, and at least even just from a her as a person, being not a old decaying white man, um felt like a big upgrade, and that’s like what I would like to see more of um from both parties is just like, I think it’s such bullshit to have these old fucking men running the country. Like, I’m like, we have to get past that, because I’m like, it’s I’t I I think it’s bullshit. I’m like, put like put an age cap on it. I’m like nobody over fucking 50, you should realistically be doing this. I’m maybe 50 is like a like 60, but it yeah, I it’s just like it’s hit such an extreme and that is like I would like to see that, like I said, like on on both sides of the spectrum, like I would rather there be a younger conservative man and a younger liberal woman running than a bunch of old people that are rich and so disconnected from what’s going on in our society.” – Interview 9

Across the board, participants expressed a desire for younger candidates—people who reflect their generation’s lived experiences and are more attuned to today’s challenges. For many, age is not just a number but a proxy for relevance and representation. They were frustrated by what they saw as a political class dominated by older, out-of-touch leaders making decisions on behalf of a future they won’t live through.

Going to Do Something, Not Nothing

“I think like the government, I feel like or maybe not even the government, but just like politicians, they're so involved in like like social issues and like, oh, like we stand with these people, these people- we stand with these people. It's like, no, I want you to just focus on, like, the United States people and like, what they need and like instead of focusing on, like you know, like in in California, like, we spent so much money on creating these, like, murals of tile along our freeways. when you go into the city and there are like, blocks and blocks of like homeless camps. So, someone who is like- prioritizes, like actual, like issues rather than just, like, I'm gonna put a bandaid over it, and look what I did over here, it's so cute, but also we have all these problems. So like, someone who, like, doesn't shy away from, like, the hard stuff.” – Interview 13

“I'm frustrated with the Democratic Party because I feel like we're not like pushing back to what's going on right now. Like I I want to see people like get angry, especially people like in law and policy makers and stuff like I want people to get angry and like push back to what's happening. Like I feel like we're all just kind of like hands in the air right now like okay, well, this is happening. um, but I wish that there was there was more being done for the people that like are in positions of power in my party to like push back and try and like fight this.” – Interview 12

“Kamala Harris within the Biden administration was like immigration was the thing that she was in charge of, and she didn't do anything, she didn't make any policies on one side or the other, whichever you would align with, she didn't do any policies for either. She didn't really do much much work to help with the border, and I feel like that is something that is a huge problem. Like, immigration within America is something that we definitely need to address and you cannot address it by building a wall or doing nothing. And she chose to do nothing, and I just didn't, that honestly I would say that was the main thing. That made me not want to vote for her, was just how it like she just like seemed to ignore the immigration crisis for all four years.” – Interview 1

“So mostly just like policies that are truly actually gonna help solve homelessness and not just, oh, let's conduct homeless raids and fuckin' say we got 800 people off the streets yesterday. It's like, okay, great, what happens next, you know? How are we gonna get them into federal housing? And then from there, obviously they're not gonna be in federal housing forever. How do we set them up for success? How do we get them a job? How do we get them into their next apartment and make sure that they can continue paying for that stuff like that? {Totally} So policies that aren't just like, circle, surface level, gonna fix the right now issue and like fix it visually, but policies that are actually gonna work in the long run and are gonna be beneficial for many people in the long run for decades to come.” – Interview 1

“I feel like a lot of women coming forward recently and not being quiet and that's been really awesome to see and be a part of as a woman. And also, what else, would I say I'm satisfied with? Yeah, I just think the amount of noise that people are making and not taking like anything lightly. Like, people are very grounded with their opinions on things, and I think that's also very important.” – Interview 6

“I mean, I just found it really, really impressive that someone can stand on their feet for 25 hours and, like talk the whole time and not take a single break, like, that was insane. Um, it also wasn't like him, like it it was him talking about issues, and it was him talking about constituents and reading personal letters that he had received from his constituents. And it was so, like emotional. And it just showed, like the care and compassion and like how personal a lot of, um, like this is to him, so I think it made me it made him stand out for me as a Senator who, like, really is into politics for the right reason. Like, he's in politics because he wanted change, and he cares about other people, he wants to help other people. Like, I think that that's something that really bothers me as seeing people, like, get into politics for, like, their own personal gain. It almost seems like it's- it's like you're-you are getting into politics. I think you have their understanding that you are a civil servant and you want to, like, work for your government and help the people of your country, and I feel like that's just like, out the window at this point, in some- in some areas.” – Interview 3

“In general, I think that Democrats have gotten really lazy in their politics and started to not, I guess, like, keep pushing for progress, but rather, like, like defend themselves, and I think it's been just a lot of playing defense.” – Interview 2

“Public pushback. I think what Bernie and AOC are doing is like, really all you can do right now. I think that they're doing exactly what they need to do. I think Cory Booker did what he needed to do, but it needs to be more than that.” – Interview 2

Trump voting-Republicans acknowledged Trump's “wild card” personality and explained their nuanced opinion on how it relates to his ability to accomplish change. Although one was skeptical of his ambitions of tackling too many issues at once, he expressed hope for what it could result in.

“I just I like that Trump can be a little bit of a wild card, and I like that he's willing to actually make moves and we're actually seeing movement. Again, we don't know if the movement's gonna be good or bad right, right now with the terrace, but if they end up good, I mean, he's been in office for three and a half, four months now, and that could be an incredible- It could be an incredible thing.” – Interview 4

“Yeah, uh, you know, I wasn't a Trump guy at first. I wasn't a big fan, but I've always had this- I I have a- I always have an e open to him. I'm not I'm not gonna close my ear down, like some people might. uh, I think some of his ideas are great, but the way he thinks of- the way he thinks of these ideas, he's not making calculated uh thoughts about these ideas. I don't. I don't know what goes behind the closed doors and the White House, but some of the things he says, like, even today it's like \$5,000 for, you know, a baby to be born. It's like, I mean, that's a good idea, but he's just got too many ideas that it's- and executive orders that it's not really uh I I just think things are all over the place right now. And you got to focus on one, two or three issues at once. Uh, I like he's trying to address a lot of things, which is great, but it's I just don't think it's sustainable, you know, four years?” – Interview 8

“I just feel that Kamala Harris herself is not really someone who is fully respected within American politics, whether or not you agree that opinion, and that that is something that is really necessary to be a successful president, like, you need to actually be able to implement change, and you need to actually be able to do what you're gonna say that you're gonna do. And while Trump says he's gonna do some awful things, he does them, and I don't feel that the Biden administration did the same thing, and so I didn't really trust that Kamala Harris would deliver on what she promised to deliver, and I honestly didn't really trust that she had the ability to do so.” – Interview 1

For the people, not for personal gain

Both parties understand one another as an elitist class that doesn't serve them. Whether that's the wealthy businessman Trump or the ivory-tower Democrats, Gen Z questions and distrusts the genuinity of the help of those deemed elitists. Their definitions of elitism differs.

“Being a politician or being in politics these days has turned a lot more away from actually working to benefit your people and has turned towards working to benefit yourself.” – Interview 1

“I think my dissatisfaction comes in the strategy. I think the Democrats don't know how to not make themselves into, like, ivory tower coastal elites. You know? And they need to, they need to be able to communicate with the Republican, like, populace who are, like, in this right-wing populism movement that, like, Trump is not a man of the people. He has \$4 billion in the bank. He's not running so he can help, so he can be a voice to the little guy who wants the power that he has. He's running because he just cares about his own power.” – Interview 2

“I think that a lot of people nowadays, especially are, like, pushed off by Democrats who act super smart. like, like by the idea that, like, Democrats can't

communicate, but there's constituents, and, like, they think that it's like the elite liberals, the liberal elites, stuff like that. I think that's probably a very significant issue because of messaging doesn't really get through. So, yeah, I think someone that just does, that's just, like, super well rounded educated, number one, but also then has that, like, personal level and ability to communicate.” – Interview 3

“Uh, I think they would value not letting an elite class take over the fucking power and money of this world.” – Interview 5

“I guess my ideal politician would be someone who is a bit more in tune with like, the life of an everyday person.” – Interview 9

“Honestly, I think, like the biggest issue for me was like, I didn't think Trump would be a good leader ‘cause like his personality. I just feel like his personality could overshadow his decisions sometimes... I would say I just didn't like Trump to be honest, like, his policies and stuff. um yeah, so then I just didn't want Trump in office.” – Interview 10

Conclusion

Despite the fragmented pseudo-environments shaping political perceptions, Gen Z has a consistent vision for what they want in a candidate. They need leaders who are younger, for the people, and will accomplish the change they want to see. Across party lines, there is shared frustration with traditional politicians perceived as out of touch or self-serving, but parties perceive this characteristic differently between candidates. This collective desire for change reflects a dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and a hopeful demand for a new generation of leadership that represents their lived realities.

Conclusion

In this massive media and communication landscape, Gen Z has to choose whose stories to care about, listen to, and vote for. They choose to care about issues that affect them and their circle. However, their circles are different based on their party affiliation. This uniquely combines the issue publics hypothesis and the partisan polarization hypothesis; Gen Z cares about things that personally affect them, but those ideas differ per party. When Gen Z makes this decision, algorithms listen. Their feed ultimately becomes out of their control, and they are now subject to consuming media algorithms think they want to see. This further separates the parties from one another, creating two contrasting media worlds. Gen Z witnesses this phenomenon through media bias, rhetoric, and catered news. Due to this, each individual creates images in their heads of reality, called pseudo-environments. Because different parties consume different content, their pseudo-environments differ and tell its consumers what to believe, what to care about, and what to think. Even if that does not wholly dictate an individual's actions, it still rests in the images they have in their head and informs how they live their lives in their real environments. And their actions made in these real environments then have real consequences. Their real environments are now where people interact with one another and vote. Gen Z witnesses the consequences of these curated pseudo-environments in the culture around politics, specifically polarization and extremism. Conversations are either silent, confirming bias, or aggressive. This political culture has no grey area or middle ground. Donald Trump, who exists both in pseudo-environments and the real environment as the President of the United States, and the two-party system are two political sources that Gen Z believes lack a middle ground as well.

Gen Z chooses who to care about in the media, chooses that content, and algorithms cater that. These media images create images in their minds, called pseudo-environments, which then

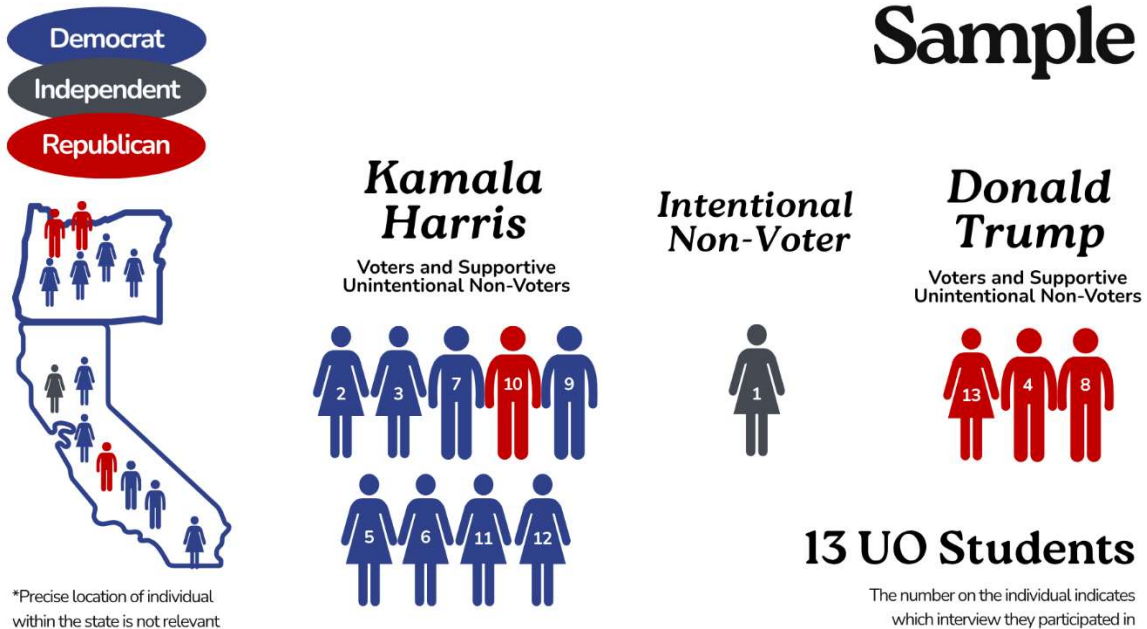
inform how they live their lives in real environments. Because each party witnesses two separate media environments, they develop distinct worldviews. Despite this polarization, Gen Z shares a collective desire for meaningful change and to be on the same team, even if they define it differently, suggesting that beneath this division lies a common hope for a better future.

Although this research depicts qualitative findings, future research could be conducted into specifically how different media images contribute to the formation of pseudo environments and if these pseudo environments have tangible impacts on a person's behaviors. Researchers could also focus on how people determinate levels of competency in candidates, whether it's through candidates' messaging, actions, and/or the pseudo environment of which they contribute in the creation. Linguistic research could be conducted on the differences in language per party and the connotations surrounding such language.

Biases in research are present, considering this study took place at the University of Oregon—a known liberal university—in Eugene, Oregon, a historically consistent blue state. Thus, this research should be considered both ethnographic and phenomenological, as it describes the lived experiences of individuals in a similar environment (e.g., the same town and university, all seeking higher education, etc.).

Appendix

Interview Sample



Qualtrics Survey Questions:

Theme One: Party Affiliation and Satisfaction

1. Are you registered to vote?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. Which political party are you registered as?
 - a. Republican
 - b. Democrat
 - c. Independent
 - d. Other: _____

3. Which political party do you most strongly identify with?
 - a. Republican
 - b. Democrat
 - c. Independent
 - d. Other:
4. Which state can you vote in?
 - a. Choose one: 50 states and Washington DC as options
5. Who did you vote for in the 2024 presidential election?
 - a. Donald Trump
 - b. Kamala Harris
 - c. Robert F. Kennedy
 - d. Jill Stein
 - e. Chase Oliver
 - f. Cornell West
 - g. Other: _____
 - h. I did not vote.
 - i. I did not vote but had intended to.
 - j. I prefer not to say.
6. How satisfied are you with your political party?
 - a. 5-point Likert scale (Very dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, neutral, somewhat satisfied, very satisfied)
7. How well does your political party represent your views?
 - a. 5-point Likert scale (Not at all, slightly, moderately, mostly, completely)

8. How well do you think our current two-party system represents the US?

- a. I think more parties would offer better representation.
- b. I think the current two-party system works well enough.
- c. I'm not sure—I'd need more information to decide.
- d. I think it would depend on how the system is set up.
- e. Other: _____

Theme Two: Interest in Politics and Media Consumption

9. How interested are you in American politics?

a. 5-point Likert scale (Very interested, somewhat interested, neutral, somewhat disinterested, very disinterested)

10. How well-informed do you believe YOU are about American politics?

a. 5-point Likert scale (Not informed at all, Slightly informed, Somewhat informed, Quite informed, Extremely informed)

11. What news channels are you likely to interact with? (Check all that apply)

- a. CNN
- b. The New York Times
- c. CNBC
- d. BBC
- e. NPR
- f. AP News
- g. Al Jazeera
- h. Fox News
- i. The Epoch Times

- j. Ground News
- k. None of these.
- l. I prefer other sources. _____
- m. I prefer other forms of media for my news gathering, such as social media.
- 12. What social media platforms do you use, if any, to consume political information?

(Check all that apply)

- a. Instagram
- b. TikTok
- c. Snapchat
- d. X (Previously known as Twitter)
- e. Facebook
- f. Youtube
- g. Other: _____
- h. I don't use social media to get my political information.

Theme Three: Motivations for Voting

13. What were your main motivators for casting your ballot? (Check all that apply or rank)

- a. I did not vote.
- b. General economic considerations
- c. Cost of living or inflation
- d. Climate change/environment
- e. Jobs and unemployment
- f. Healthcare

- g. Gun rights
 - h. Gun control
 - i. Abortion access
 - j. Abortion restriction
 - k. Foreign policy (in the Middle East, Ukraine, etc.)
 - l. Racism
 - m. Voting rights and democracy
 - n. Free speech
 - o. Religious freedom
 - p. Education
 - q. Childcare
 - r. Immigration
 - s. LGBTQ+ issues
 - t. Endorsements from celebrities, influencers, or podcasters. _____
 - u. Other: _____
14. Do you believe in climate change?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Not sure

Interview Guide

Theme One: Interest in Politics and Media Consumption

Interest	1. How would you describe your interest in American politics? What, if anything, makes you pay attention to political events or issues? a. Can you think of a time when something political grabbed your attention? What was that? b. Are there any issues or events that you feel personally affected by? c. Can you share what you enjoy or don't enjoy about following politics, if anything? d. What aspects of politics do you find engaging, if any? e. If you're not interested, what do you think keeps you from being engaged? 2. How do you feel about your level of understanding when it comes to American politics? a. Are there areas of politics that you feel more knowledgeable about than others? b. What would help you feel more informed about political issues?
<i>Media Consumption</i>	1. When you want to learn more about a political issue, what sources or methods do you turn to?

	a. Are there sources you trust more than others? b. How do you decide what information to trust when learning about politics? 2. Do you feel that the information available to you is enough to make up your mind about political issues? a. What do you feel is missing from the information you see? b. Do you think the information out there is complete, or is there something you wish was covered more? 3. How often do you interact with news sources about politics? Is it something you seek out, or does it find you? 4. Are there any social media accounts or influencers or politicians that you follow for political content? a. What makes them interesting to you? b. What makes them trustworthy? 5. What do you think about the partisanship in American news media? 6. Do you ever look for news or opinions outside of your go-to news sources? What motivates you to do this?		
Q Topic	Major party voters	Third-party voters	Nonvoters

Theme Two: Party Affiliation and Satisfaction

<i>Parties</i>	1. I'd love to discuss your thoughts on your political party. a. What aspects of your political party are you satisfied with? b. What changes would you like to see in your political party?	1. I'd love to discuss your thoughts on your political party. a. What aspects of your political party are you satisfied with? b. What changes would you like to see in your political party?	1. What was the reason you opted out of voting? 2. Is there a political party that resonates more with you? 3. What would you like to see out of a political party? 4. What would motivate you to vote?
<i>Ideal situation</i>	1. Pretend you can create your ideal politician from scratch—someone who you'd be excited to represent our country. Tell me about them. a. What policies or issues would they prioritize? b. What kind of big changes would you like to see from them? c. How would they communicate with opposing parties?		

	d. What qualities would they have that current politicians might be missing? What makes them different from politicians today? e. Is there anyone like them in our current political landscape?	
	Are they similar to the candidate you voted for? • Interview 11- cops and circles and sphere of effect	Would this person motivate you to vote?
Two-party	1. Do you believe there are pros to voting for a major party rather than a third party? 2. If you had the power to change, keep, or start new—how would you approach the party system in the US? 3. Do you think the two-party system encourages or discourages political participation among people your age? Why?	
Political landscape	1. What are your thoughts about the culture around politics in America?	
Theme Three: Motivations for Voting		
Motivators	1. What do you think is the biggest issue America was facing leading up to the 2024 election? a. How do you see that issue playing out now?	

	1. Can you share more about why you chose the issues you selected as motivators for your vote? a. What made these issues stand out to you as particularly important? b. How did you decide which issues to prioritize over others? 2. How did the candidate you voted for represent these issues that mattered most to you? a. Did their stance align with your values? b. -what does America and American people mean to people. What does privilege mean to people. Pragmatic and less idealistic	1. Was there a candidate's stance on key issues that would have motivated you to vote? 2. What do you think needs to change for you to feel motivated to vote in future elections?
<i>Final thoughts</i>	Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is really important to understand your relationship with politics and the 2024 election?	

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