

According to Harvard poll, Gen Z is deeply concerned about future and whether politicians can fix it

BY GAYA GUPTA WASHINGTON POST

Is Gen Z all right? According to a new poll from the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, maybe not.

More than 40% of 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed last month said they are struggling or just getting by, and one-quarter believe they will be worse off financially than their parents. Many distrust the White House and Congress, both major political parties and, to some extent, each other. And while most reject political violence, nearly 40% say it is acceptable under certain circumstances.

The message is clear, said John Della Volpe, the institute's director of polling: The systems and institutions meant to support young Americans no longer feel stable or responsive to them, and they are fearful for what comes next.

"Young Americans right now have no clue what the future holds, and are deeply concerned about that," said Jordan Schwartz, the 20-year-old student chair of the Harvard Public Opinion Project.

"They don't think the country is in a great place right now, and they also

don't see any reason to believe it's going to get better anytime soon.”

It has been a tough year for many young Americans, who face a rough labor market and layoffs across industries, high housing costs, and loneliness so dire that it disrupts daily life.

The findings of the Harvard poll – which surveyed about 2,000 people – reflect that, with artificial intelligence driving much of young people's fears about job security. A majority of young Americans see AI as a threat to their job prospects, and a plurality believe AI will reduce their own opportunities.

Rayan Falouji, a 22-year-old living in New York City, said he was unsurprised to see other people in his age group name the economy as one of their top concerns.

As a recent college graduate working in the music industry, he said his day-to-day concerns also revolve around rent and food prices.

“Every conversation with friends or family, or even just strangers, is about the cost of living,” Falouji said. “It's the number one thing right now.”

Luis Reyes, a 26-year-old living in Los Angeles, was laid off from their job at a film production company two months ago and has felt frustrated that they have not been able to find even part-time work while they continue applying for jobs in their field.

“I'll always end up in the final stages of an interview, and then somebody else gets picked. ... And sometimes, I'll go to coffee shops or to cafes, restaurants, and they will tell me I'm overqualified,” they said. “It feels like I can't even get the jobs that are supposed to be easier to access.”

Initially, Reyes's unemployment claim was denied through a clerical error, preventing them from accessing benefits like food stamps and Medicaid and forcing them to go through a court process to appeal the decision. Without the affordable health insurance they had through their job, two medical scares, including a broken nose, have placed more strain on their expenses, Reyes said.

The poll also found that a majority of young people carry negative impressions of both political parties. When asked to sum up Democrats and Republicans in one word, “weak” was most commonly used to describe Democrats, and “corrupt” was most common for Republicans.

The poll's respondents also lacked confidence in President Donald Trump's administration and legislators from both parties, with approval rates coming in below 30% for all three groups. Most respondents also disapproved of the way the president is handling the economy and health care, according to the poll's findings.

And even though Democrats were still meaningfully favored among young people, the poll found nearly half of all Democratic respondents described their own party poorly. Support for the party persists not because of genuine enthusiasm, but because young voters do not see an alternative, according to the report.

Falouji said he and his peers felt this sentiment during the 2024 presidential campaign, faced with what they viewed as two poor candidates. They are still frustrated, he said, by the amount of money the country invests in the military and foreign conflicts while the domestic cost of living remains high. New York Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, a democratic socialist, saw swelling support, Falouji said, because he succeeded in addressing people's everyday concerns about costs.

"A lot of people got a sense of reinvigoration and that maybe electoral politics could be used to actually serve people and to alleviate burdens people are feeling," he said.

Disillusionment with America's main economic system – capitalism – grew across party lines, after a spike in support in 2020. Support for other major economic ideologies, democratic socialism and socialism, also declined in the past five years, the survey found.

Democratic socialism saw the biggest drop in support, from 40% in 2020 to 29% last month, though support remained steady among Democrats. Support for socialism also decreased overall, but it grew among Democrats.

Support for identity-driven and antiestablishment movements – such as President Donald Trump's MAGA movement and democratic socialism – remains strong within their respective parties, the poll found.

Trust is also low among Gen Z, the poll found, with nearly half of young people avoiding talking about politics for fear of judgment, and just over one-third believing that those with differing political views still want what's best for the country.

The survey also included its first question about political violence this year, Della Volpe said. The question's addition came after the United States experienced several incidents of high-profile political violence recently: Conservative activist Charlie Kirk was fatally shot at a college event in September; Minnesota state Rep. Melissa Hortman, a Democrat, and her husband were killed at their home in June; and the home of Pennsylvania's Democratic governor, Josh Shapiro, was set on fire in April.

Most respondents said they do not endorse political violence under any circumstance, but 28% said they would support it when the government violates individual rights. Twelve percent said they support it when election outcomes are fraudulent, 11% each said they support it if someone else encourages violence or when someone promotes extremist beliefs, and 10% said it was acceptable when peaceful protests fail to accomplish their goals.

Della Volpe added that additional statistical testing did not find a link between partisanship and ideology as a significant predictor of support for political violence. But it found that those who view political violence as more acceptable face greater economic precarity, lower trust in institutions, higher social alienation and stronger beliefs that others hold harmful intentions.

Those findings are key, Della Volpe said, because they make clear that neither political side is more open or prone to condoning political violence.

"If we address the systemic factors, violence goes down," he said. "Tolerance to violence goes down."

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