

McMaster University

# Undergraduate Journal of Law & Politics



May 2025

# The Impact of Political Institutions on the Voter Turnout of Generation Z

Julia Allan

## Introduction

A political institution refers to all political aspects of a state and how they interact to create structure, norms and behaviours within a given society.<sup>[1]</sup> This includes political actors, policies, and the various peripheral factors that shape the political world. In democratic political institutions, voters and the ability to vote are essential for democratic maintenance and sustainability. With the specific aspect of voter turnout being explored, its critical presence in democracy ensures the legitimacy of both its leader and the regime.<sup>[2]</sup> As voter turnout is an essential feature in the upkeep of democratic values, the declining voter turnout of youth must be analyzed and understood in order to properly uphold Canadian democratic standards for future generations.<sup>[3]</sup>

Generation Z, the current generation of adults born from 1997-2012, has the lowest global voter turnout among all eligible voting demographics.<sup>[4]</sup>

For many years, these rationalizations have been dominantly demographic-based, indicating that factors such as age, education, and socioeconomic status primarily determine an individual's likelihood to participate in voting.<sup>[5]</sup> Although these explanations provide important demographic insights into Gen-Z voting patterns, they neglect broader, systemic explanations. Through an examination of the evolving values and societal influences shaping the perspectives of Generation Z, alongside a comparative analysis of specific political frameworks, one may gain insights into the responses of modern youth and how it reflects in their electoral engagement. Through this research, it can be concluded that the three institutional components of media influence, level of civility among politicians, and electoral complications, impacts Generation Z's voter turnout, as it negatively alters political perceptions.

[1] Roberto Nisticò, "Political Institutions and Economic Development Over More Than a Century," *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics* 61 (2022): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.strueco.2022.02.013>.

[2] André Blais, Carolina Galais, and Daniel Mayer, "Is It a Duty to Vote and to Be Informed?" *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 4 (2019): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919865467>.

[3] Blais et al. "Duty to Vote," 329.

[4] John H. Parmelee, Stephen C. Perkins, and Brittany Beasley, "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram: What Generation Z Wants to See in Political Posts," *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 9 (2022): 1773, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2022.2027500>.

[5] Filip Kostelka and André Blais, "The Generational and Institutional Sources of the Global Decline in Voter Turnout," *World Politics* 73, no. 4 (2021): 633, 636, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887121000149>.

## Generation vs. Age

The disparities between voter turnout in young adults and the rest of the population have been prevalent throughout many decades. Numerous teams and individuals have widely researched this topic, and they draw similar conclusions each time. Age and maturity are one of the oldest theories, as the correlation between brain development and becoming situated with one's rights and civil obligations is drawn upon.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, maturity and place in the life cycle are influential on one's inclination to be a political participant, however, many recent studies suggest a different primary factor. The role of generational identity continues to be theorized as the main cause of low voter turnout for young adults.<sup>[7]</sup> Many academics believe that societal evolution combined with the formation of different ideals and morals throughout the years cause young adults to no longer feel represented by politicians.<sup>[8],[9]</sup><sup>[10]</sup> This idea remains challenged by the previous, as Klecka attributes low participation to age rather than generation.<sup>[11]</sup> As both opposing theories certainly hold validity to an extent, neither can be fully true. To suggest that age is not a factor when it comes to voter turnout completely ignores

the past century in which young adults consistently held the lowest voter turnout. After all, the statistics from the 1970's to 1996 show that the voter turnout for American youth ages 18 to 24 was almost consistently 20% lower than that of the average.<sup>[12],[13]</sup> To disregard generational factors, on the other hand, is to ignore the differences between each generation, as well as the evolution of society as a whole. Factors such as technological and economic growth, and the evolutionary changes society faces throughout the years, all sway the political habits of the public, as the transformative effect of globalization among generations is unique to each.<sup>[14]</sup> Both generation and age must be considered as intertwining factors that affect public opinion both individually and collaboratively.

## Generation Z

Being the first generation to grow up with social media, a heightened global awareness has challenged many previous social norms. This increased interconnectedness allows individuals to share common ideals, many of which revolve around authenticity and morality.<sup>[15]</sup>

[6] William R. Klecka, "Applying Political Generations to the Study of Political Behavior: A Cohort Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1971): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1086/267921>.

[7] Kostelka and Blais, "Generational and Institutional Sources," 636.

[8] Kostelka and Blais, 637.

[9] Klecka, "Applying Political Generations to the Study of Political Behavior," 358.

[10] Mark Strama, "Overcoming Cynicism: Youth Participation and Electoral Politics," *National Civic Review* 87, no. 1 (1998): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.87106>.

[11] Klecka, "Applying Political Generations to the Study of Political Behavior," 358.

[12] Klecka, "Applying Political Generations to the Study of Political Behavior," 358.

[13] Strama, "Overcoming Cynicism," 72.

[14] Kostelka and Blais, "Generational and Institutional Sources," 634.

[15] Parmelee et al., "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram," 1779.

In turn, Generation Z is significantly more dissatisfied with politics than any other generation, holding politicians accountable for anything ranging from bad policy decisions to disagreeable actions from decades past. One of the most influential movements led by Generation Z is the call for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.<sup>[16]</sup> Not only did this international movement spread awareness of the occurring social and political wrongdoings, but held politicians, corporations, and even peers accountable for any actions that promoted injustice.<sup>[17]</sup> Historically, politicians could operate with limited transparency, leaving society uninformed. In today's age of extensive documentation, any lack of transparency only serves to foster distrust, especially within young adults, as they already hold a skeptical view of politics.<sup>[18]</sup> Growing up with extensive, and often undecipherable, information and misinformation, it is reasonable for Generation Z to be wary of the political realm, considering the stage of the lifecycle and the generational divide between themselves and politicians.<sup>[19]</sup> Therefore, through the transparency of politicians, and the prioritization of

authenticity rather than perfection, especially on social media, improved trust in the government of generation Z may occur.

### Media Influences

Being influenced by the internet and various media since birth, Generation Z is highly acclimatized to the consequences that bad actions can have on others, as it is advertised through multiple forms.<sup>[20]</sup> News channels, documentaries, and clips are forms of everyday media that provide current or relevant events. Depicting smaller-scale stories of wrongdoings such as vandalism, and larger-scale stories such as violent crime, Generation Z has been significantly more exposed to the repercussions that ignorance poses. This increased exposure fosters self-awareness and subsequently enhances their sensitivity toward unethical conduct, ultimately resulting in a left-wing generation.<sup>[21]</sup> Unlike previous generations, who may have been mobilized by hostile campaigns, Gen Z tends to disengage when they perceive politics as divisive or disconnected from real social issues, as they seek reform over frivolous conflicts.<sup>[22],[23]</sup> Therefore, campaign strategies rooted in negativity, and ignorance of social problems, are factors that heavily

[16] Mohamed Buheji, "How is Gaza Inspiring Gen-Z and Changing their Mindsets?," 2024. *International Journal of Social Sciences Research and Development (IJSSRD)* 6 (01): 2. [https://lib-index.com/index.php/IJSSRD/article/view/IJSSRD\\_06\\_01\\_001](https://lib-index.com/index.php/IJSSRD/article/view/IJSSRD_06_01_001).

[17] Buheji, "How is Gaza Inspiring Gen-Z and Changing their Mindsets?," 13.

[18] Parmelee et al., "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram," 1775, 1771.

[19] Blais et al. "Duty to Vote," 336.

[20] Kristian Niemietz, "Left Turn Ahead: Surveying Attitudes of Young People Towards Capitalism and Socialism". *Institute of Economic Affairs Monographs No. 81* (2021): 50. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3893595>.

[21] Niemietz, "Left Turn Ahead," 67.

[22] Parmelee et al., "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram," 1782.

[23] Corrine Hofmann, "How Generation Z Canceled the United States Government: An Analysis of Trust," *Politics Honors Papers*. 17 (2024). [https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pol\\_hon/17](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pol_hon/17).

contribute to the absence of young people in the political world. This is not to suggest that Generation Z is completely absent, as there are certainly select avid participants, however, the frequent misalignment in values between politicians and today's youth does not create the desire to be a regular voter. So, while an especially important or controversial campaign could pique the interest of youth, and therefore pique the interest of their social network, youth may instead be further deterred from politics as a whole.<sup>[24]</sup> Even so, politicians must break this intergenerational detachment and act to authentically address pressing social issues in the media to cater to young adults today, in order to create regular voters for the future.

It is stated that individuals with access to empowering channels are more likely to vote as they connect to and engage with a community.<sup>[25]</sup> This applies heavily to Generation Z, as young people can be easily influenced, and are also in the stage of maturing that creates a sense of belonging and identity.<sup>[26]</sup> Meanwhile, social media provides instant access and connection to communities and other people. Given that an individual in one's social network is eager to vote or passionate about politics, this hyper-

connection could indeed foster the same inclination in others.<sup>[28]</sup> Oppositely, it is theorized that compared to previous generations, Gen Z's familiarity with media and similar technologies has ameliorated their ability to detect and dispel fake news.<sup>[29]</sup> So, although social media could surely foster an inclination to participate in an upcoming election, the threat to the circulation of legitimate information and properly informed voting has yet to be fully examined. As the rest of Generation Z reaches voting age, it remains to be seen whether their heightened digital engagement will translate into increased voter turnout or if misinformation and political disengagement will counteract this potential.

### **Regular Voters**

A general issue surrounding voter turnout is the number of regular voters or in other words, individuals who vote at nearly every election.<sup>[30]</sup> With many marginal voters, meaning those who vote at select elections, and non-voters, a true representation of the eligible voter pool can never be attained.<sup>[31]</sup> It has been proven that the majority of marginal voters and non-voters possess left-leaning political ideologies.<sup>[32]</sup>

[24] Rizwan Tariq and Fatima Zeib, "Political Empowerment Among Young Voters: Social Media, Partisanship and the Moderating Role of Political Interest," *Comunicar* 31, no. 74 (2023): 104, <https://doi.org/10.3916/c74-2023-08>.

[25] *Ibid.*, 104.

[26] Klecka, "Applying Political Generations to the Study of Political Behavior," 358.

[28] Kostelka and Blais, "Generational and Institutional Sources," 633.

[29] Buheji, "How is Gaza Inspiring Gen-Z and Changing their Mindsets?," 10.

[30] Anthony Fowler, "Regular Voters, Marginal Voters and the Electoral Effects of Turnout," *Political Science Research and Methods* 3, no. 2 (2015): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2015.18>.

[31] Fowler, "Effects of Turnout," 210.

[32] Fowler, 208.

Similarly, several studies have shown that Generation Z tends to hold primarily left-wing values.<sup>[33],[34],[35]</sup> Therefore, it must be assumed that most young individuals are likely to fall into this pattern of low voter turnout. Furthermore, given that deterrence from voting and politics is often enhanced by the media, the pool of leftist irregular voters will likely expand.

This is problematic when considering the oversaturation of right-winged individuals in the pool of regular voters and its influence on an accurately represented electorate.<sup>[36]</sup> Aside from the obvious democratic concerns, a disproportionate turnout could sway results, and inevitably cause further political dissatisfaction and a further lack of participation.

### **Electoral Systems - Simplicity and Civility**

As decreasing voter turnout has been established to be significantly problematic, run-off elections and ballot simplicity may be to blame.<sup>[37],[38]</sup> By observing the negative shift in voter turnout when electoral systems pose added steps or inconveniences such as

complicated ballot layouts, the effects of institutional influence are clearly outlined. One example includes the regularly scheduled primary runoffs in the U.S House and U.S. Senate from 1994 to 2022, where voter turnout faced a median 40% decline after the first round of voting.<sup>[39]</sup> Since eligible voters are more inclined to participate when the electoral process is simplistic, multiple opinions on a ballot and lengthy run-offs are least ideal.<sup>[40]</sup> When considering the maturity levels of Generation Z as well, it is unlikely that they would want to engage in a multi-step process.<sup>[41]</sup> This demonstrates how seemingly minor issues within political institutions can significantly alter the accurate representation of the eligible voter pool. In turn, more simplistic electoral systems that do not require a second or third round of voting have resulted in increased voter turnout.<sup>[42]</sup>

Since the simplicity in structure, and decorum among actors are both important aspects in determining voter turnout, a system that takes both factors into account must be most effective. The single

[33] Parmelee et al., "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram," 1778.

[34] Niemietz, "Left Turn Ahead," 11.

[35] Keir Milburn, *Generation Left* John Wiley & Sons, 2019.

[36] Fowler, "Effects of Turnout," 205.

[37] Bryan Dettrey, and Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer. "Voter Turnout in Presidential Election Democracies" *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 10 (2009): 1317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009332125>.

[38] Andrew Reynolds, Marco Steenbergen, "How the world votes: The political consequences of ballot design, innovation and manipulation," *Electoral Studies*, Vol 25, Issue 3 (2006): 589. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2005.06.009>.

[39] Jeremy Rose, "Primary Runoff Elections and Decline in Voter Turnout, 1994-2022," (2022). <https://fairvote.org/report/primary-runoffs-report-2022/>.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] Amelia Hassoun et al, "Practicing Information Sensibility: How Gen Z Engages with Online Information," 12.

[42] Alistair Clark. "The Effects of Electoral Reform on Party Campaigns, Voters, and Party Systems at the Local Level: From Single Member Plurality to the Single Transferable Vote in Scotland," *Local Government Studies* 47, no. 1 (2020): 88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2020.1816544>.

transferable vote (STV) embodies both simplicity and civility, as one casts a single ballot with no run-off voting, and a decrease in party competition allows for a less hostile nature.<sup>[43]</sup> This can be seen through the few countries that use this system, but most notably at a local level in 2007 Scotland, as the recent reform allows for a modern comparative analysis of the two systems.<sup>[44]</sup> Given the decrease in conflict between actors, an increase in voter turnout occurred, ultimately proving the theory that negative campaign strategies deter voters.<sup>[45]</sup> Although a few complications arose due to the new ballot structure, it is not to discredit the simplicity of the STV system, as turnout remained high in following years, and ballot rejections lessened.<sup>[46]</sup>

## Conclusion

Voter turnout can be influenced by many factors, both demographic and institutional. As factors such as age, race, education, and socioeconomic status are all influential, the influence of factors such as media and ballot structure are not diminished. By analyzing how age and generation work together to determine political engagement and opinions, the unique collective and political characteristics of Generation Z can be defined. Then, by examining how young adults interact with different forms of media and misinformation, the unlikeliness of becoming

a regular voter is addressed. Followed by the importance of civility and simplicity in politics through the connections of previous topics and real-world situations, a final conclusion may be drawn. The low voter turnout of Generation Z is indeed impacted by modern political institutions, as flaws such as widespread misinformation, normalized hostility between oppositions, and complicated and confusing electoral procedures, have painted a negative image of politics in the minds of youth. Perhaps by addressing these systemic challenges and developing a culture of transparency, partnership, and education, Generation Z will be more inclined to participate.

[43] Ibid, 88, 92.

[44] Ibid, 82.

[45] John H. Parmelee et al., "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram," 1781.

[46] Clark. "The Effects of Electoral Reform on Party Campaigns," 89.

**Bibliography**

Blais, André, Carolina Galais, and Daniel Mayer. "Is It a Duty to Vote and to Be Informed?" *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 4 (2019): 328–39.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919865467>.

Buheji, Mohamed, "How is Gaza Inspiring Gen-Z and Changing their Mindsets?". 2024. *International Journal of Social Sciences Research and Development (IJSSRD)* 6 (01): 1-22. [https://lib-index.com/index.php/IJSSRD/article/view/IJSSRD\\_06\\_01\\_001](https://lib-index.com/index.php/IJSSRD/article/view/IJSSRD_06_01_001).

Clark, Alistair. "The Effects of Electoral Reform on Party Campaigns, Voters, and Party Systems at the Local Level: From Single Member Plurality to the Single Transferable Vote in Scotland." *Local Government Studies* 47, no. 1 (2020): 79–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2020.1816544>.

Dettrey, Bryan J., and Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer. "Voter Turnout in Presidential Democracies." *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 10 (2009): 1317–1338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009332125>.

Fowler, Anthony. "Regular Voters, Marginal Voters and the Electoral Effects of Turnout." *Political Science Research and Methods* 3, no. 2 (2015): 205–219. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2015.18>.

Hassoun, Amelia et al, "Practicing Information Sensibility: How Gen Z Engages with Online Information," *Association for Computing Machinery*, no. 662 (2023): 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581328>

Hofmann, Corrine, "How Generation Z Canceled the United States Government: An Analysis of Trust," *Politics Honors Papers*. 17 (2024). [https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pol\\_hon/17](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/pol_hon/17).

Nisticò, Roberto. "Political Institutions and Economic Development Over More Than a Century." *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics* 61 (2022): 199–215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.strueco.2022.02.013>.

Klecka, William R. "Applying Political Generations to the Study of Political Behavior: A Cohort Analysis." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1971): 358. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267921>.

Kostelka, Filip, and André Blais. "The Generational and Institutional Sources of the Global Decline in Voter Turnout." *World Politics* 73, no. 4 (2021): 629–667. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887121000149>.

Milburn, Keir. "Generation Left"



Niemietz, Kristian. "Left Turn Ahead: Surveying Attitudes of Young People Towards Capitalism and Socialism". Institute of Economic Affairs Monographs No. 81 (2021): 11-69, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3893595>.

Tariq, Rizwan, and Fatima Zeib. "Political Empowerment Among Young Voters: Social Media, Partisanship and the Moderating Role of Political Interest." *Comunicar* 31, no. 74 (2023): 101–112. <https://doi.org/10.3916/c74-2023-08>.

Parmelee, John H., Stephen C. Perkins, and Brittany Beasley. "Personalization of Politicians on Instagram: What Generation Z Wants to See in Political Posts." *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 9 (2022): 1773–1788. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2022.2027500>.

Reynolds, Andrew, Steenbergen, Marco. "How the world votes: The political consequences of ballot design, innovation and manipulation," *Electoral Studies*, Vol 25, Issue 3 (2006): 570-598, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2005.06.009>.

Rose, Jeremy. "Primary Runoff Elections and Decline in Voter Turnout, 1994-2022," (2022). <https://fairvote.org/report/primary-runoffs-report-2022/>.

Strama, Mark. Overcoming Cynicism: "Youth Participation and Electoral Politics." *National Civic Review* 87, no. 1 (1998): 71–78. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.87106>.



**MUJLP**