



How do young adults (18–26) in the
United States understand and experience
self-agency in contexts they perceive as
politically hopeless?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Over the past decade, trust in American political institutions has steadily declined, particularly among young people. Survey data from the 2024 presidential election shows youth turnout dropping to 47%, alongside widespread dissatisfaction with political leadership and a growing sense of disconnection from formal political processes. Despite this, young Americans continue to express strong political opinions and remain engaged in discourse, raising a central question: how do young adults understand their own ability to act politically in an environment they perceive as increasingly unresponsive?
- This study investigates how individuals aged 18–26 in the United States experience and interpret self-agency under conditions of perceived political hopelessness. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, including a survey of 105 respondents and 28 semi-structured interviews, the research examines both the prevalence of political disillusionment and the ways in which young people navigate it in practice.
- The findings reveal a paradox at the core of contemporary youth political behavior. While participants reported high levels of distrust toward federal institutions—alongside feelings of frustration, fear, and pessimism—they did not disengage from political life. Instead, political hopelessness emerged not as apathy, but as a reconfiguration of agency. Young adults continue to vote, engage in political discussions, and remain informed, even when they doubt the effectiveness of these actions.
- At the same time, participants consistently shifted their sense of agency away from national institutions and toward more immediate, controllable domains. Local politics, personal relationships, and everyday decision-making were perceived as more meaningful sites of influence. Many also adopted alternative strategies to sustain engagement, including limiting media consumption, reframing participation as self-maintenance, and locating agency in personal well-being or “quiet” forms of resistance.
- These findings challenge conventional understandings of political hopelessness as a precursor to disengagement. Instead, they suggest that young Americans remain politically active, but in ways that are more individualized, adaptive, and less visible within traditional frameworks of participation. In this context, agency persists not through confidence in institutional change, but through the ongoing effort to maintain political identity and meaning in an environment where systemic impact feels increasingly out of reach.

Keywords: Political hopelessness, Self-agency, Youth political engagement, Institutional distrust, Collective action, Political participation, United States, Mixed-methods research

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1.0 Introduction

In the past year over ten million people took part in the No Kings protest, a series of three nation-wide protests held in opposition to the actions and policies of the second Trump administration (BBC News, 2026). Professor Dana Fisher of the School of International Service at American University tracked the demographics of the participants in the three installments of the No Kings protests. She found that “at No Kings 1 (June 14, 2025) the median age was 36, at No Kings 2 (Oct. 18, 2025) the median age was 44, and at No Kings 3 (March 28, 2026) it was 48” (The New York Times, 2026). Despite poor turnout in the demographics of participants at the anti-Trump movement protests, the majority of young Americans were found to “overwhelmingly disapprove of Trump and plan[ned] to vote for Democrats in 2026 (Yale Youth Poll, 2026).” This begs the question: why is it that despite their reproach towards the current political state of the United States, are young Americans not pouring into the streets to confront it? Throughout history, the American youth have been instrumental in spearheading social and political movements. Notably, iconic examples include the Civil Rights movement, the Anti-Vietnam War movement, and more recently, activism surrounding gun control in the March for Our Lives movement. This rich tradition of youthful mobilization makes the current lack of youth attendance at American protests in the current political environment all the more puzzling.

Our research question is derived from this modern anomaly: How do young adults (aged 18-26) in the United States understand and experience self-agency in contexts they perceive as politically hopeless? We sought to understand how the socio-political behavior of young people can change depending on how they perceive their political environment, with a particular focus on changes under negative circumstances. This question has received attention across multiple fields, but has yet to be fully conceptually developed. Some exploratory studies in sociology might explain this issue by citing a general trend in domestic government bodies abandoning perceived moral and ethical values, resulting in a growing sense of apathy amongst the American youth. Studies in social psychology refer to increased levels of depression and mental health issues reported across Generation Z as explanation for their unwillingness to take political action or participate in civil disobedience. This study examines political hopelessness and self-agency from a political science lens, investigating if political efficacy is a potential factor shaping both.

First, we propose a connection in the literature between environments of political hopelessness and collective action, and define agency theory as the necessary framework for understanding this relationship (Bird 2024). Then, we delineate the historical and political context wherein we conduct our study in order to justify a focus on negatively perceived political circumstances. Finally, we explain and discuss our quantitative and qualitative observations from our survey (n = 106), and interviews (n = 28) of young adults ages 18-26 in the United States. With these

findings, we argue that young adults in the United States do not experience political hopelessness as a byproduct of passive disengagement. Instead, they understand it as a reorientation of agency— away from institutional change and toward personal, local and even affective forms of political self-maintenance.

2.0 Literature Review and Definitions

Political hopelessness is often treated as interchangeable with cynicism, apathy, or general disaffection, but it describes something more specific. This study uses the term to define a distinct affective-cognitive state; one that carries particular consequences for how individuals understand their own capacity to act. Arriving at that definition requires drawing together several lines of research.

At its core, political hopelessness is a judgement on change, more specifically the belief that the political system is incapable of producing it. Long (1978) first identified hopelessness as a distinct dimension of systemic disaffection, separate from the broader dissatisfaction or mistrust that political alienation describes. What sets hopelessness apart is not solely a dissatisfaction with the way things are, but also a characteristic conviction that circumstances cannot better or exist in any other way. Bird, working under the closely related label of political despair, give this conviction a more precise structure (2024). They identify two appraisals operating in tandem: a perception that the status quo is illegitimate, and a perception that it is intractable. Hopelessness emerges specifically at their intersection — when a person concludes that something is both wrong and unchangeable.

This belief does not stay directed outward. One of Long's (1978) central findings is that political hopelessness is bound up with self-competence: people who perceive the system as broken also come to doubt their own capacity to act within it. The judgement about institutions becomes a judgement about oneself in relation to those institutions. This is what distinguishes political hopelessness from a purely analytical position — it is not simply a pessimistic reading of the political landscape but an affective state that reshapes how a person understands their own efficacy. Yet the relationship between hopelessness and action is not straightforward. Bird et al. (2024) found that even among individuals experiencing deep political despair, motivation toward collective action — both conventional and radical — persisted. Diminished self-competence and continuous will to act can coexist, a tension the present study examines directly.

Political hopelessness also has a temporal quality that a static definition risks overlooking. Ojeda (2024) argues in *The Sad Citizen* that political depression — a broader emotional category encompassing despair, disappointment, sadness, and melancholy — operates as a self-reinforcing cycle. Withdrawal from participation leads to misrepresentation of one's interests, which produces outcomes that confirm the individual's original disillusionment, deepening the withdrawal. This cycle disproportionately impacts communities that are already marginalised, whether that be by race, gender, or income, and consequently political depression compounds existing structural pressures. Hopelessness, on this account, is not a single moment of judgement but something that accumulates and entrenches, progressively narrowing a person's sense of what the current governing body can offer them.

With all of this prior information in mind, the present study defines political hopelessness as an affective-cognitive state in which an individual perceives the political system as both illegitimate and intractable, resulting in diminished self-competence and a tendency toward emotional and participatory withdrawal — a withdrawal that, over time, can become self-reinforcing and perpetual. Existing research has largely examined this phenomenon through quantitative measurement or within specific policy domains such as racial inequality and climate change. How young people understand and narrate their own political hopelessness — particularly the diffuse, cross-cutting disillusionment that characterises the current political moment — remains an open question, and one this study takes up through qualitative inquiry.

The question that follows is not simply whether hopeless individuals disengage, but what happens to agency when the belief that one's actions can produce effects and stimulate change is brought to question. Answering these questions requires engaging with the second core theme of this paper's research self-agency as agency theory provides the necessary frameworks for understanding how, and why people act in distinct environments. In the context of this paper, the environment posited is one of political hopelessness. Generally, personal sense of agency and political environments do not appear to be intrinsically connected in the literature on this topic. While both concept are mentioned in articles and scholarly conversation in the general social sciences, research on self-agency is often found in psychological literature; and research on political environments and perception belongs to political science. We argue that drawing on psychological understandings of self-agency is essential for making sense of how individuals navigate constrained political environments, and it is Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory that provides the most developed framework for doing so.

Bandura (2001) defined being an agent as being one “to intentionally make things happen by one's actions.” and established four core properties through which this capacity operates. First, intentionality is understood as a representation of a future course of action to be performed, without inherently taking consequence into account (Davidson 1971). Second, self-regulation then refers to the choice and execution of the appropriate courses of action. Forethought allows people to motivate themselves and direct their actions in anticipation of future events; it is what allows a person to sustain effort toward a goal that has not yet materialised. Self-regulation is the stage at which moral agency takes shape and influences decisions in an inhibitive, or proactive form. This inhibitive dimension is particularly relevant as it consists of the deliberate restraint of action— choosing not to speak, not to engage and not to participate, as an expression of agency in itself. Finally, self-reflectiveness allows individuals, to evaluate their motivation and values, once an action is executed, and whether their pursuit carries meaning.

Self-reflectiveness allows for perceived self-efficacy: the understanding that one's actions have produced a favorable outcome which would motivate one to act again. It is the foundation of agency, because believing that actions can produce effects provides the incentive to act at all. In a political environment perceived as unresponsive, this foundation comes under sustained pressure. When self-reflection consistently returns the same answer that one's actions produce no meaningful effect the incentive to act erodes, and with it the capacity for agency that Long (1978) identified as the first casualty of political hopelessness.

Bandura's framework operates with the assumption that self-agency is fundamentally goal-driven. To extend this, we incorporate a concept of infrapolitics, which describes forms of agency that operate outside of overt, goal-directed action (Scott, 1990). Developed from his study of how subordinate groups exercise power when open resistance is too costly, infrapolitics names the political life that exists beneath the threshold of formal or visible action (Scott, 1990). It accounts for refusal, withdrawal, and subtle acts of resistance as meaningful expressions of self-determination, even when they do not align with traditional measures of political participation (Scott, 1990). Examining infrapolitics enables a more comprehensive understanding of participant experiences that may not resemble conventional civic engagement, yet still reflect underlying agency within constrained environments. Unlike Bandura's self-regulation, which operates as a tactical restraint in service of a future goal, infrapolitics describes agency that has exited the framework of goal-directed action entirely.

In the context of political hopelessness the question of collective action must be addressed. In their writings, Bandura (2001) and Bird (2024) find a common ground. Bandura (2001) outlines three modes of agency: personal, proxy and collective agency. He addresses these as direct agency, agency executed through others, and coordinated group action, respectively. Bird (2024) addresses the collective dimension directly in the context of political hopelessness, identifying a negative correlation between political despair and collective actions. However, it is worth noting that the study also found that motivation toward collective engagement can persist even under conditions of deep disillusionment.

Collective action as a concept spans both political science and psychology and has been examined in both fields (see Mackie et al., 2000; Cohen-Chen & van Zomeren, 2018; Greenaway et al., 2016; Włodarczyk et al., 2017; Gould, 2012). We especially see this in the context of motivation for collective action, and environments which may elicit certain reactions and emotions from large groups of people, most notably, a body politic. However, as we have addressed, there remains the lacuna between personal agency, as Bandura defines it, and political research. Agency theory provides the frameworks for understanding the actions of individuals in constrained environments; however few studies have actually examined how people—especially young adults—themselves articulate agency amid perceived political hopelessness.

3.0 Political Context and Background

To understand what young Americans said about political hopelessness and self-agency in 2026, it is necessary first to understand the political environment in which their attitudes were formed. With accelerating polarisation, the COVID-19 pandemic and a series of institutional shocks (such as the January 6 insurrection and the overturning of the *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court case), allowed political hopelessness to develop into a meaningful object of study.

First we begin by examining American political polarisation, as it predates the specific events this section examines, and it provides the structural conditions that made those events so effectively resonant. Emotions have historically been an impactful factor driving American political behaviour, but their role as an explicit object of political strategy intensified significantly during and after the 2016 Presidential Elections. Although Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential Elections appeared as a shock to some, in reality Trump's campaign was drawing from the already apparent polarisation in American politics that stemmed from racial, cultural, and ideological differences (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2018, p.1). This appeal drew from the large demographic group of white working-class voters in the United States (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2018). This ability has become a strong point of support for Donald Trump and has altered the state of American politics as a large demographic of Republican supporters are now driven solely on the basis of cultural conservatism instead of the traditional economic ideology (Bartels, 2018).

Additionally, Trump relied on the longstanding trend of negative partisanship during the 2016 elections and even more in the 2024 elections, essentially intensifying the division between political parties to the extent that he was able to gain voters on the basis of drawing hostility against the opposing party (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2018). The result was a political atmosphere structured around social anger, fear, and distrust of institutions, designed to produce and sustain a sense of embattled in-group identity (Hidalgo-Tenerio, Benítez-Castro, 2020).

Polarisation alone does not account for the depth of institutional distrust this study encountered. A series of specific historical events compounded it, each one adding a layer to what Ojeda (2024) describes as the self-reinforcing cycle of political disillusionment. The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on trust in American politics, as it highlighted the significance of responsive institutions, swift policy change, and outlets for accurate information (Harbridge-Young, Mersey, p.1, 2022). In the years that followed, trust in medical institutions fell sharply as pandemic policy became a central front in the broader cultural war, with government-imposed restrictions serving as a flashpoint for existing ideological divisions (The Economist, 2025). Surveys taken throughout 2024 showed declining trust in the Federal government, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the news media, and in general social trust— a pattern held by both Trump and non-Trump voters (The Economist, 2025). For young people the pandemic was one of the early signs of institutional unreliability.

Two years later, the institutional distrust was demonstrated through the January 6 insurrection, in which a mob of Trump supporters violently stormed the Capitol in an attempt to prevent the certification of the 2020 election results, which resulted in a panic from the general American public. The violence itself was alarming, but the perceived absence of meaningful consequences for those responsible compounded the damage, suggesting to many observers that the institutions designed to protect democratic norms were either unwilling or unable to do so.

Research conducted by the Learning Network in the aftermath found that teenagers across the country “reacted emotionally, expressing disgust, anger, fear and outrage” while “several others reflected on the state of American democracy” (2021). The overturning of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court Case resulted in a similar frustration with governmental decisions. NPR conducted a poll which found that 58% of the respondents believed that lawmakers made the decision on abortion in the interest of donors rather than the public (Benshoff, 2023). Similarly, nearly 3 in 5 Americans say that the decision prioritized politics rather than the law and studies have shown that 58% of Americans would say that they don’t place significant trust in the nation’s highest court, showing the decline in confidence in the Supreme Court (Santhanam, 2022). Both events contributed to the same conclusion that the formal mechanisms of democratic accountability were unreliable and this is what the literature identifies as the cognitive core of political hopelessness.

The cumulative weight of these experiences is visible in the 2024 presidential election turnout data. Among young people aged 18 to 29, turnout dropped from the previous presidential election to 47%— a figure that varied significantly by demographic, with the White youth turning out at 55% and the Latino youth at just 32% (Medina & Hilton, 2025). Research attributes the decline to a combination of organisational neglect by both major parties and a deepening sense of disconnection from political leadership (Medina, Siegel-Stechler & Suzuki, 2025). Young people did not stop caring about politics so much as they stopped believing that the available political options were worth engaging with. This distinction matters for the study, as the Americans surveyed and interviewed have entered the political realm during this precise moment of compounding distrust and institutional failure. Understanding their relationship to political hopelessness and self-agency requires holding that context in view.

4.0 Methodology

The quantitative data for this paper was derived from a standard survey. This survey was publicly available for just over two weeks, during which 105 responses were collected. As the purpose of the survey was to screen for individuals’ self-perceived levels of political hopelessness and their notions of self-agency in such times within the context of American politics, the sample of respondents were limited to American citizens. Respondents were also required to be between 18 and 26 years of age (with over 90% between 18 and 22). These study parameters were set by both the survey's marketing and the nature of the questions themselves.

Respondents within these boundaries were asked to self-report their current or former academic institution. Although there was a wide variety of schools (apart from those mentioned below) in both typology and geographic location, an overwhelming majority of participants were current students of Princeton University (60), the University of St Andrews (21), and the College of the Holy Cross (7). Participants were also asked about their state of origin, and 29 states were mentioned. Of the 29, most repeated states were in either the Northeast or the West 10

Coast. 65% of individuals who opted to disclose their gender were female, while the remaining 35% of respondents were male, nonbinary, or transgender (32% of which were males). Two-thirds of respondents reported being members of households earning at least \$100k per year (33% of the total earn at least \$200k per year). Perhaps the most directly relevant of the survey's preliminary screening questions asked participants to indicate their political party affiliations. 83% of respondents indicated that they were more liberal and Democrat-leaning, while 7% were more conservative and Republican-leaning, and the remaining 10% noted they were unaffiliated with either of the two major American parties.

The survey itself was promoted and distributed in a multitude of ways. The most effective means of proliferation was to get different academic institutions to email their students. To limit bias it was made clear to students that they were neither obligated nor incentivized to take the survey. Physical leafleting was also utilized. Because the sample consisted almost exclusively of students and was not randomly selected, the findings may not be a fair or effective measure of the broader population. Self-reported data may also introduce bias, especially in questions that elicit an emotional response from some individuals. As a comment on bias as a whole, questions were crafted with the intention of remaining emotionally neutral, objective and clear. Closed-ended questions were diligently crafted to include all reasonable answers and be as unambiguous as possible. Questions were structured and closed-ended, using scaled responses, such as agree-disagree, on a 1-5 scale.

To complement the survey data, this study also employed qualitative, semi-structured interviews to explore how young adults interpret and experience political hopelessness and self-agency in greater depth. While the survey identified broader trends in political attitudes, the interviews provided insight into the meanings and emotions underlying those patterns. The two strands were treated as mutually informing as quantitative findings establish the prevalence and distribution of attitudes, while interview data supply the mechanisms and lived experience behind them.

Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with American participants aged 18 to 26, recruited through university networks and personal contacts across multiple institutions and geographic contexts. Interviews were conducted in person or via video call, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed. Each interview followed a semi-structured format, consisting of open-ended questions addressing political feelings, perceptions of agency, and forms of engagement, with probing follow-up questions to allow participants to elaborate beyond fixed-response constraints. Interview length ranged from approximately ten to twenty minutes.

The collected data was analysed using an inductive thematic process following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns in participants' language and responses. From there, data was grouped into broader themes, including emotional responses to politics, perceived limitations of political i

nfluence, and alternative forms of engagement. This approach was integrated into the study because it prioritised and revealed participants' own interpretations, thus enabling a more complex understanding of how political hopelessness is experienced at the individual level.

5.0 Findings

Drawing on twenty-eight semi-structured interviews and a quantitative survey conducted in March 2026, the findings reveal a cohort navigating profound structural pessimism through active, if often unconventional, strategies of political self-maintenance. Taken together, the two datasets suggest a pattern of institutional distrust that coexists with a sustained commitment to political engagement.

Participants' emotional responses to the contemporary political climate were uniformly negative, a pattern borne out across both methodological strands. Common themes within survey respondents included frustration, stress, and anxiety, reflecting a broader sense of dissatisfaction. At the same time, a smaller subset of responses suggested the presence of cautious optimism, indicating that some respondents maintain a degree of confidence in the future despite widespread discontent. At times, the two emotions were present in the same response, noting a sense of faith despite the perception of a broken and/or flawed political structure. Nevertheless, negative sentiment remained the dominant trend, with many participants expressing concern about the current state of the American political system (Appendix, S, A23).

Interview participants elaborated on the texture of this negativity in detail. Fear was the most frequently articulated response, ranging from diffuse anxiety about democratic backsliding to concrete, identity-specific concerns around immigration enforcement. Several participants invoked the possibility of armed conflict, civil or international, as a plausible near-future scenario. Alongside fear, participants described what one interviewee termed a sense of "overloadedness" or a cognitive and affective overwhelm produced not merely by the content of political events but by their volume and pace (Appendix, I1, A1). This experience manifested in different ways across the sample: some participants deleted social media accounts, others rationed political consumption to preserve their functional capacity, and one described beginning to cry while scrolling through her feed in the library (Appendix, I10, A5). These responses show a general sense of political overwhelm, as a distinct state, enhancing the acknowledged pessimism or disengagement.

A structurally significant finding across both datasets concerns participants' relationship to institutional trust. 76% of respondents reported low confidence in the federal government to act in their best interests, while 0% reported high confidence. Even more specifically, 95% of respondents reported low or mixed confidence in Congress, with 0% reporting high confidence once again. 85% of respondents reported low or mixed confidence in the Supreme Court.

Interview data helps explain the reasoning underlying these figures. Participants described federal institutions as being captured by elite interests and incapable of meaningful responsiveness. As one participant put it, regardless of what party comes into power it is “bad and much worse, and there's no good option” (Appendix, I9, A6). Additionally, over 50% of respondents in the survey agreed with the statement “no matter what ordinary people do, powerful interests will always win,” and 45% of responses disagreed with the statement “elections in the U.S. are run fairly”, both figures rising to approximately 80% when neutral responses are included.

Yet this structural disillusionment did not translate into apathy, and this constitutes one of the study's main findings. Over 50% of respondents disagreed with the statement “I avoid political information because it makes me feel helpless,” and over 60% of respondents agreed that they engage in political conversations, and that those conversations are important to the state of the political structure. Interview participants reinforced this, describing sustained engagement with news sources and peer discussion even when they doubted its tangible efficacy. Another described staying informed as itself a form of political commitment, arguing that the capacity to critically evaluate political information was foundational to any other form of engagement (Appendix, I5, A3). One participant who described calling senators and leaving “strongly worded messages” acknowledged this “does very little,” but continued regardless: “I like to think that I do something” (Appendix, I4, A3). The data thus suggest that political hopelessness among this cohort is driven less by disengagement and more by a crisis of institutional trust, a distinction with significant implications for how youth political apathy is typically theorised.

This pattern is clearly illustrated in the divergence between participants' attitudes toward federal and local government. While 76% reported low confidence in the federal government, 80% of respondents reported having high or mixed confidence in their respective state governments, suggesting that proximity and perceived accessibility play a meaningful role in shaping political trust. Interview participants elaborated on this contrast, describing local politics as more accessible, more legible, and more genuinely responsive to individual action. As one participant described, “I'm more likely to believe in my town paving a pothole than my country not bombing Iran” (Appendix, I9, A6). This local/federal divide appears to function as a structural organiser of political agency among young adults as participants directing meaningful expectations and energy toward the local while maintaining considerably more limited hopes for change at the federal level.

Self-silencing or the deliberate withholding of political views in particular social contexts also emerged as a common practice across the interview sample, and one that further complicates simple narratives of youth political disengagement. Participants described moderating or suppressing their views in conservative environments, professional settings involving power differentials, and households where political disagreement risked relational damage. Most framed this as strategic rationality, distinguishing between conversations that could be

productive and those that could not. One participant noted that political expression online had become untenable because "anything you say can be taken out of context" with potential career consequences (Appendix, I8, A5), pointing to a broader chilling effect on public political expression that survey measures of engagement alone would fail to capture.

The most common definitions of self-agency positioned it as freedom of movement, expression, and autonomous choice, while a closely related framing emphasised efficacy, or the sense that one's decisions produce downstream effects on one's own or others' lives. A more analytically distinctive framing emerged across several interviews: one participant described "joy is a form of resistance" as an operative framework for political self-understanding (Appendix, I10, A2), thus locating agency in the domain of affect and personal wellbeing and distancing it from formal participation. This conception, in which sustaining oneself as an engaged and hopeful person is itself understood as a political act, recurred in various forms and suggests that conventional measures of political participation may undercount the ways in which this generation experiences and exercises agency.

When asked directly whether they felt politically hopeless, the majority of interview participants resisted the label despite describing the political situation in deeply pessimistic terms. Participants distinguished carefully between hopelessness —understood as a complete and permanent withdrawal of faith entailing inaction— and a more qualified pessimism compatible with continued engagement. Several preferred terms such as "deterred," "pessimistic," or "uncertain." Quantitative data show that while the current attitude toward the American political system reflects heightened levels of self-perceived frustration, anxiety, and anger, it would be unfair to assert that the body of respondents is politically hopeless. Across both datasets, participants had developed what might be described as a repertoire of strategies for sustaining agency under structural disempowerment. This included reframing meaningful action toward the local and relational, practising deliberate disengagement as self-preservation rather than withdrawal, cultivating collective identification as a counterweight to individual powerlessness, and appealing to historical cyclicity as a framework for maintaining hope. These findings complicate straightforward accounts of political hopelessness as passive or apolitical, revealing instead a group that is actively, but quietly negotiating the terms of its political participation in the face of institutions it no longer trusts.

6.0 Discussion

6.1 Distrust without apathy

Participants in this study expressed widespread distrust, anger, and fear towards the current US administration. By the terms of the existing literature, these are the conditions under which political hopelessness should take hold as there exists a perceived illegitimacy and intractability of the political status quo that, according to Long (1978), erodes self-competence and drives withdrawal. Yet withdrawal is not what the data consistently show. The majority of participants

continued to engage in individual political acts — most notably voting and political discussion with peers, family, and on social media — even as they articulated deep skepticism that these acts would produce systemic change.

What participants described was an environment in which institutions felt hostile or indifferent to their interests, and in which organised collective engagement played a limited role in their political lives. A few participants did identify collective action as meaningful, but the dominant pattern was individual: people acting on their own terms through the channels most immediately available to them. Bandura's (2001) framework helps make sense of this pattern. When proxy agency — relying on representatives or institutions to act on one's behalf — is undermined by distrust, and when collective agency feels largely absent from a person's political reality, what remains is personal agency: direct individual action that does not depend on institutions or coordinated movements. Voting and political discussion are, in this context, the most accessible expressions of that remaining mode.

This explains the form the action takes, but not why it persists. Many participants continued to act politically despite doubting that their actions would produce the change they wanted — which points beyond instrumental motivation to something the acts themselves sustain. Bandura (2001) identifies self-reflectiveness as a core property of human agency — the capacity to examine the meaning and purpose of one's own pursuits, not merely their likely results. This property offers a way of understanding what participants may be sustaining through continued political action: not an expectation of change but a sense of themselves as people who hold political commitments and act on them. Voting, on this reading, is not only an attempt to influence an outcome but an assertion of political selfhood — a refusal to become the disengaged person that the cycle Ojeda (2024) describes would predict. The same applies to political discussion, which for many participants appeared to function less as persuasion and more as a way of processing, affirming, and maintaining their political identities in conversation with others.

This finding extends the work of Bird et al. (2024), who demonstrated that political despair does not necessarily preclude collective action. The present data suggest that in this population, the action that persists alongside hopelessness is predominantly individual rather than collective, and its persistence appears to be driven as much by identity and self-concept as by expectations of political efficacy. Political hopelessness and political agency, on this account, are not opposite ends of a spectrum. They coexist — but the character of agency shifts, becoming less about producing change in the system and more about sustaining a sense of self within it.

6.2 Local/Federal Divide

The polarity in public attitudes toward the federal and local sectors of the United States government is a manifestation of a deeper separation behind the scenes and thus a potential indicator of what young Americans value in the bodies they civically engage with. As noted in the findings, 76% of respondents reported low confidence in the federal government as a whole (with specific branches varying but ultimately reflecting a similar pattern), while 80% of the same sample reported a mixed or high level of confidence in their respective state and local governments. Despite these data's apparent binary nature, their combination, and rather reflection of each other, suggest a profound divide in the governing bodies and structures that young Americans trust.

A relatively high level of trust and confidence in state and local governments in America is hardly new. Contemporary literature on individuals' tendency to harbor a deeper sense of conviction in their state and local bodies points to proximity and visibility, as well as reduced partisanship, being valued among citizens (Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, 2025; Proszowska et al., 2022).

It is to be expected that a local or state government would be perceived as more influential in the day-to-day affairs of any given individual, simply because it is more visible than the federal government. This proximity enables lower levels of government to be more responsive than a nationwide body, creating the perception, whether based in reality or not, that local and state governments have greater investment in the communities they preside over. This commentary is the most likely explanatory factor for the responding sample's overwhelming preference to trust and have confidence in their local and state governments rather than the federal government, but how could this trust be transposed to examine how their perceptions of nationwide polarisation and animosity operate within the lower dominions of government? Local and state governments, while still responsive to ideological politics, customarily distance themselves from debates in metatheory and overarching philosophy in order to be as effective as possible. Put plainly, a town council would not bode well in the eyes of its population discussing matters of overseas conflicts while a pothole plagues the main street, or an elementary school is without heat. Quantitative and qualitative data suggest that (young) Americans are exhausted with the unprecedented climate of polarisation in America today. To situate these prominent levels of trust in local and state governments – within the theory that they meddle less in partisan politics – suggest that Americans confide more in a governing entity that is less intrinsically divisive.

6.3 Strategies for agency

The research done also reveals a set of strategies through which participants actively reshape their sense of agency in a political environment perceived as hopeless. Firstly, this is showcased through the reframing of meaningful political action toward the local and expressing distrust and skepticism about the federal institutions. Although Bandura's (2001) framework suggests an explanation in what he calls proxy agency —the pursuit of goals through social networks

and intermediaries rather than through direct institutional channels— the data seem to suggest something more than a pragmatic substitution of arenas. The combination of proxy agency with other recurring strategies, such as the deliberate disengagement as self-preservation, rationing of political media consumption, deletion of social media accounts, and stepping back from particular conversations, points to something more systemic in how this cohort relates to political life. These choices were framed as acts of self-governance, necessary for the protection of their capacity to remain engaged over time and not burn-out. This resonates with Bandura's (2001) concept of self-regulation, and maps onto Scott's (1990) notion of infrapolitics, in which strategic retreat and non-participation are understood not as the absence of agency but as its exercise under constrained conditions.

A third strategy was the appeal to historical cyclicity as a cognitive resource for sustaining hope. Several participants anchored their resistance to full hopelessness in a temporal framework that situated the present moment as one phase within a longer arc of democratic struggle. This is a particularly interesting move, as it suggests the need for new meaning-making, instead of action through which the structure of the political environment is not changed, but rather the affective relationship to it. Thus, continued engagement remains possible as the present-tense conditions are temporary. Finally, the emergence of what one participant termed "joy as a form of resistance" (Int. 10) concludes the broad tendency in the sample to locate agency in everyday self-determination, instead of traditional forms of formal participation. These strategies suggest that young Americans are neither particularly active nor passive, rather they are a generation that internalises and individualises disempowerment to produce quieter ways to continue engaging in political life.

6.4 Limitations and future directions

Several limitations are worth acknowledging, both in the interpretation and as a basis for directing future inquiry. The most significant one concerns the composition of the sample. Although participants were drawn from twenty-nine states, the overwhelming majority were current students at Princeton University, the University of St Andrews, and the College of the Holy Cross— three institutions, not necessarily representative of the broader population of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-six. Approximately two-thirds of the participants reported household incomes of at least \$100,000 per year, 83% identified as politically liberal, and geographic representation was concentrated in the Northeast and West Coast. Taken together, those should be considered as limiting the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, future studies should seek to account for broader and more socioeconomically diverse recruitment strategies.

A second limitation pertains to the temporal and cross-sectional character of the data. The survey and interviews were conducted in March 2026, a specific moment of acute political turbulence in the United States. As the political context is particularly dynamic and uncertain, it

is not possible to determine from this data whether the patterns identified reflect stable features of this cohort's political disposition or responses particular to the political conjuncture in which the study was conducted. Longitudinal research designs that track the same participants across shifts in the political environment would allow researchers to distinguish between these possibilities and to examine how individual strategies for agency evolve in response to changing institutional conditions.

Lastly, certain inherent limitations apply to the qualitative component of the study. The interview sample of twenty-eight participants necessarily restricts the range of experiences captured. Interview duration, typically between ten and twenty minutes, was sufficient to elicit initial articulations of political feeling and agency, but may have been insufficient for participants to develop more complex or contradictory positions that longer conversational inquiry might have surfaced. Future qualitative work might benefit from extended ethnographic engagement or longitudinal interviews that permit the researcher to observe how participants' strategies for agency are enacted in practice.

7.0 Conclusion

In this research project we conducted an in depth investigation into how individuals perceive their self-agency, what factors influence this perception, and what implications come from these findings. The underlying presumption is that young individuals understand themselves as living in a time of political hopelessness in the United States. While most of our findings would support the claim that young individuals are politically hopeless, when asked this question the majority of participants claimed to not resonate with such a term. The issue being the finite implication of the term hopeless. However, our research supports the finding that the majority of young individuals in the United States feel pessimistic about the political state of the country, particularly in a systematic sense. This pessimism largely emerges from the polarised state of the United States and dissatisfaction with the actions of the government, which leads to a high percentage of individuals having less trust in governmental institutions and thereby their agency within their government.

Despite this, we observed that young individuals continue to engage in political discourse and action, speaking to the way in which political possibility leads to forms of agency seen within today's youth. Young individuals generally believe they have a larger amount of self-agency in local politics compared to federal politics. However, even considering this, the majority of the participants in this research study continue to participate in federal politics by voting in presidential elections. This leads us to the overall conclusion that, although the American youth have a pessimistic understanding of American politics, owing to their individual experiences and institutional barriers, this does not entirely curtail their self-agency. Rather individuals continue to practise their self-agency in a diverse manner of ways, whether it be remaining informed on current news or protesting in the street.

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9.0 Appendix

9.1 Survey Questions and Responses

Survey Responses - Following Data Collected on 26 March with 105 Responses

Q1: What is your primary field of study?

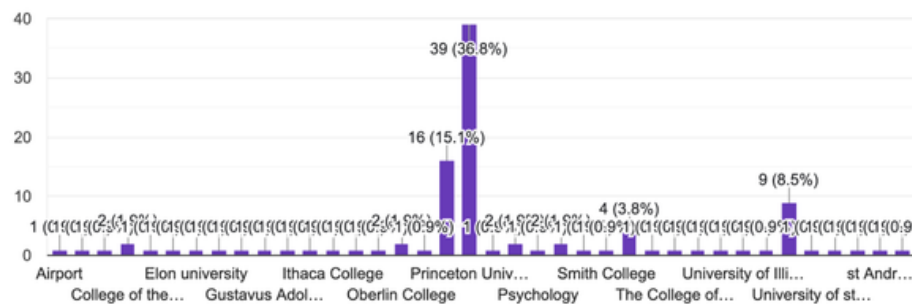
A1: Majors were grouped into the following categories: Social Sciences and Public Policy, Engineering and Applied Sciences, Natural Sciences and Mathematics (STEM), Humanities, Business and Finance, Interdisciplinary Programs, and Arts and Creative Fields.

Q2: Where do/did you study?

A2:

Where do/did you study?

106 responses

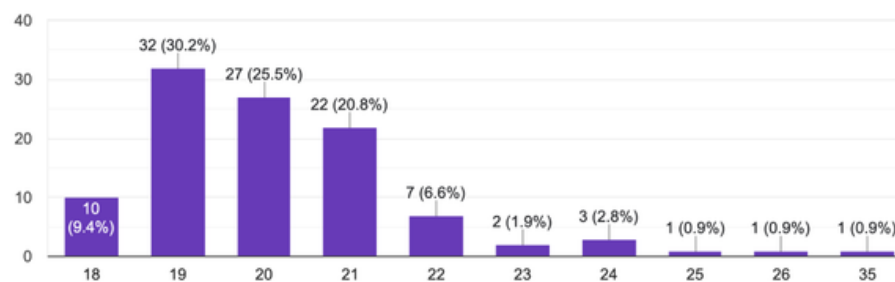


Q3: How old are you? (18-26)

A3:

How old are you? (18-26)

106 responses



Q4: What state are you from?

A4:

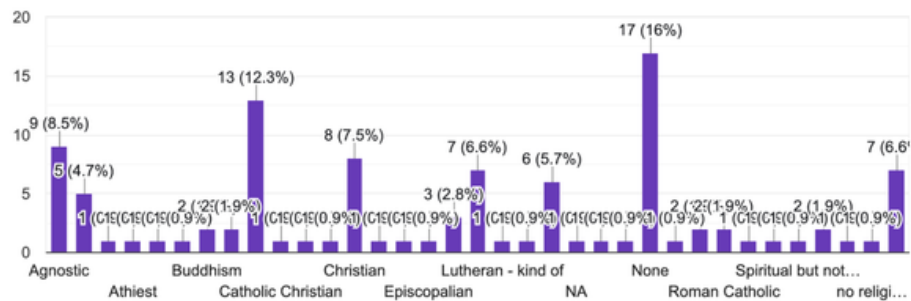
Locations were grouped as follows: New York, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Maryland, Michigan, Virginia, Florida, West Virginia, Georgia, Idaho, Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and multi-state or mixed responses.

Q5: If any, what is your religious affiliation?

A5:

If any, what is your religious affiliation?

106 responses

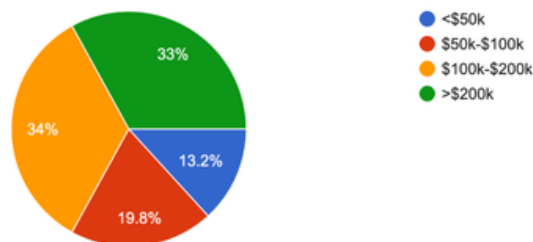


Q6: To the best of your knowledge, what is your household income?

A6:

To the best of your knowledge, what is your household income?

106 responses

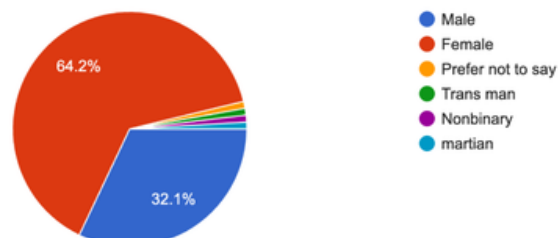


Q7: What best describes your gender?

A7:

What best describes your gender?

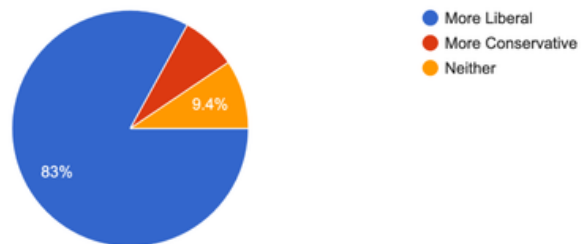
106 responses



Q8: Would you describe yourself as more liberal or more conservative?

A8:

Would you describe yourself as more liberal or more conservative?
106 responses

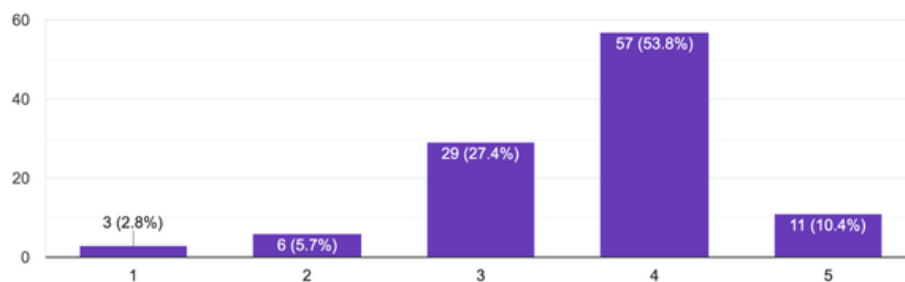


The following are questions on self-agency.
Consider:
1=Strongly Disagree
5=Strongly Agree

Q9: I feel in control of my life.

A9:

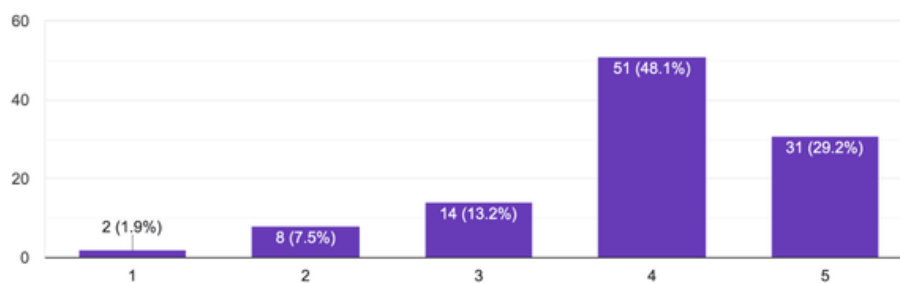
I feel in control of my life
106 responses



Q10: I take initiative when confronted with a problem.

A10:

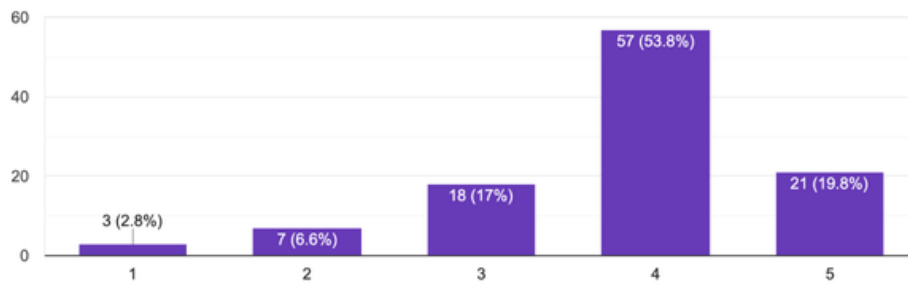
I take initiative when confronted with a problem
106 responses



Q11: I can easily imagine how I might solve obstacles and problems I'm facing.

A11:

I can easily imagine how I might solve obstacles and problems I'm facing
106 responses

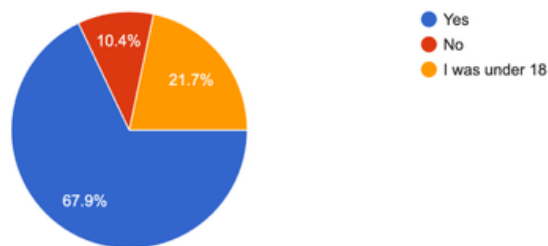


The following are questions on political engagement.
Consider:
1=Strongly Disagree
5=Strongly Agree

Q12: Did you vote in the 2024 presidential election?

A12:

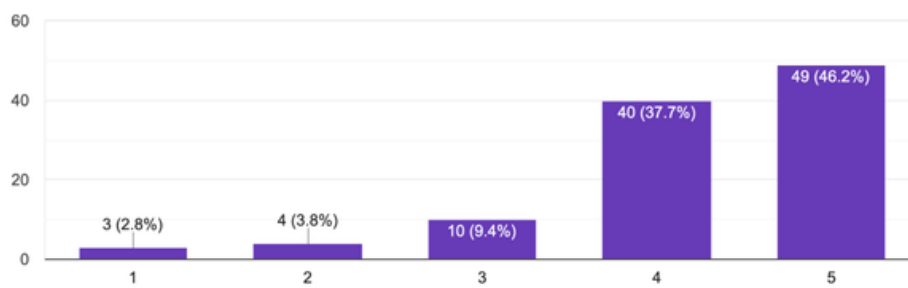
Did you vote in the 2024 Presidential election?
106 responses



Q13: I care about politics.

A13:

I care about politics
106 responses

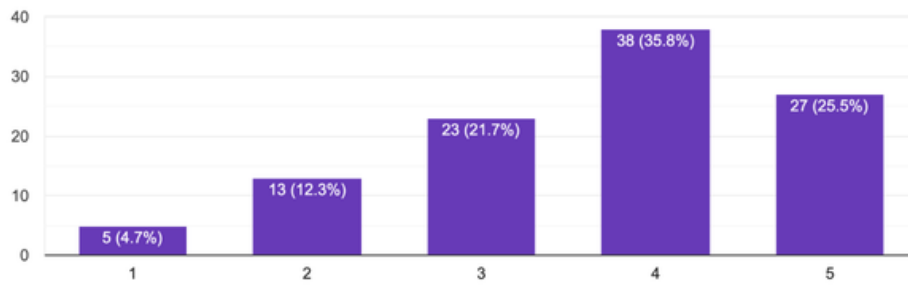


Q14: My vote counts.

A14:

My vote counts

106 responses

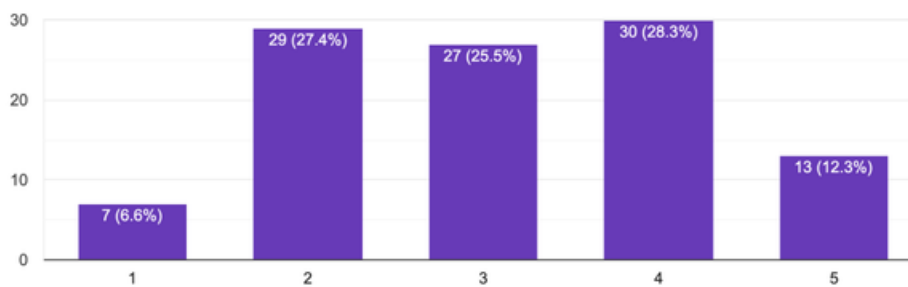


Q15: I have a say in policies that impact me.

A15:

I have a say in policies that impact me

106 responses

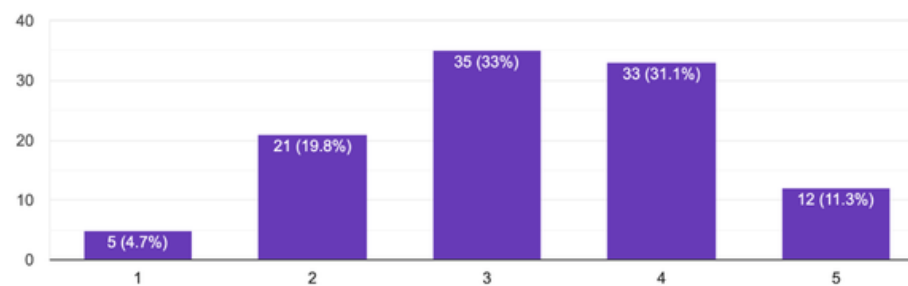


Q16: Protests lead to real change.

A16:

Protests lead to real change

106 responses

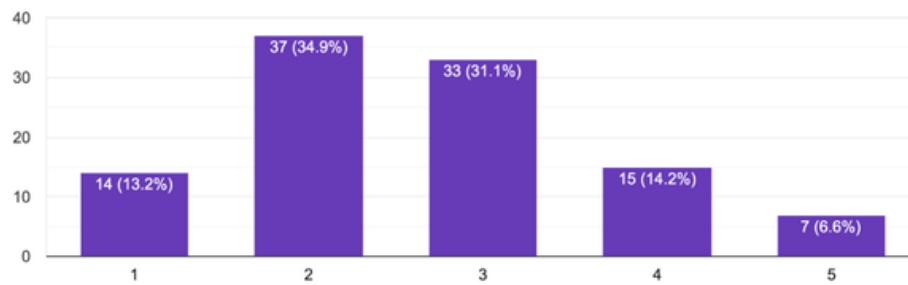


Q17: If I contacted an official, it would make a difference.

A17:

If I contacted an official, it would make a difference.

106 responses

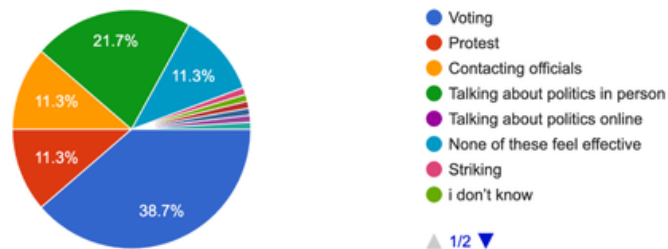


Q18: Which is the most effective way to engage in politics?

A18:

Which is the most effective way to engage in politics?

106 responses



Page 2:

Boycotts!

Consumer buying power is very important yet hardly leveraged

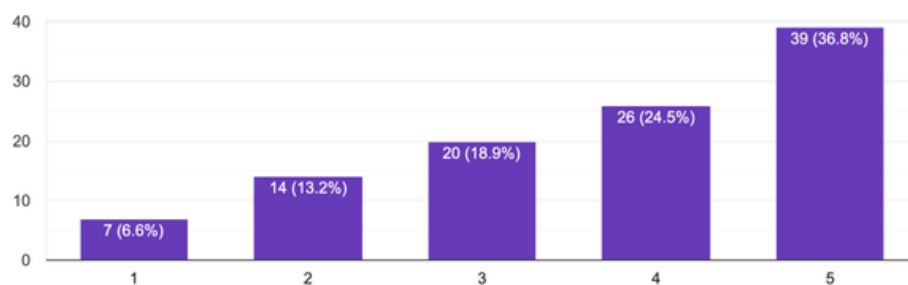
I know I said I think protest is ineffective, but that's not entirely true. I think impulsive and short-lived protest is (which is what we usually do now bc of social media) but I think organized... A mix of all of these

Q19: I participate in conversations about politics.

A19:

I participate in conversations about politics

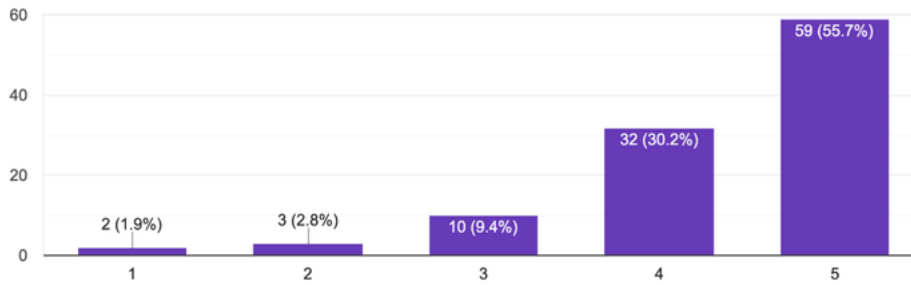
106 responses



Q20: Conversations about politics are important.

A20:

Conversations about politics are important
106 responses

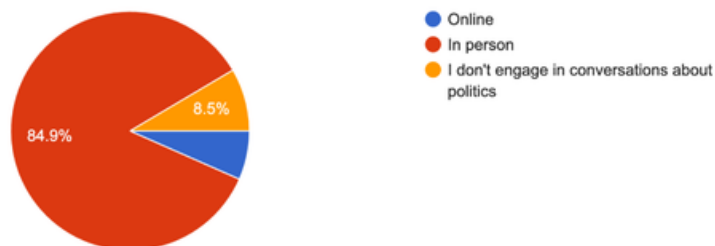


Q21: Do you prefer to have political conversations online or in person?

A21:

Do you prefer to have political conversations online or in person?

106 responses

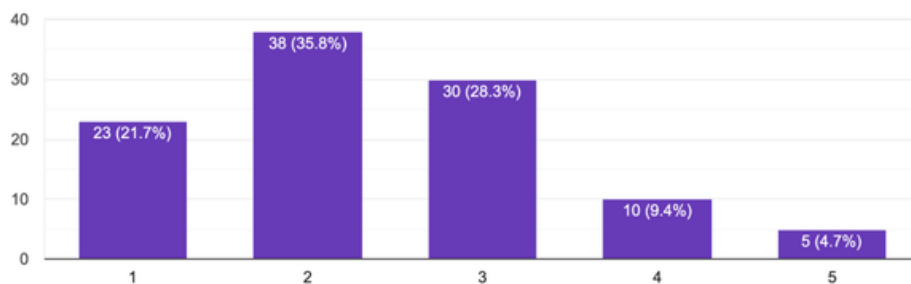


Q22: Posting/sharing political content feels like real action.

A22:

Posting/sharing political content feels like real action.

106 responses



The following are questions on levels of political hopelessness.

Consider:

1=Strongly Disagree (or) Low Confidence (or) Very Pessimistic

5=Strongly Agree (or) High Confidence (or) Very Optimistic

Q23: When I think about politics, I mostly feel (shortly):

A23:

Emotional responses were grouped into the following categories: frustration and annoyance, stress and overwhelm, anger, fear and anxiety, sadness and depression, hopelessness and

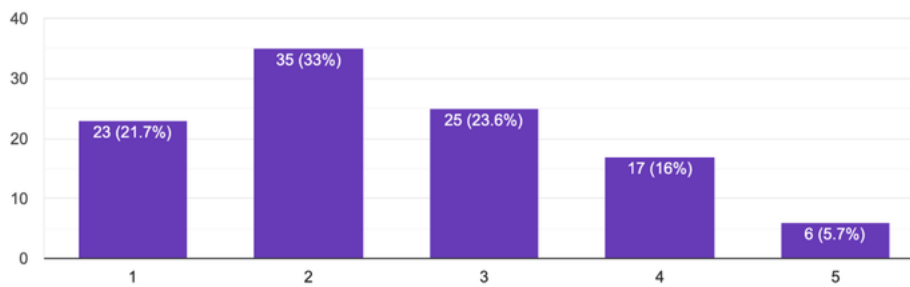
powerlessness, concern about the future, confusion and uncertainty, disillusionment and distrust, political fatigue and exhaustion, lack of knowledge, indifference or neutrality, interest and curiosity, mixed or conflicted emotions, hope and optimism, and empowerment and motivation.

Q24: I avoid political information because it makes me feel helpless.

A25:

I avoid political information because it makes me feel helpless.

106 responses

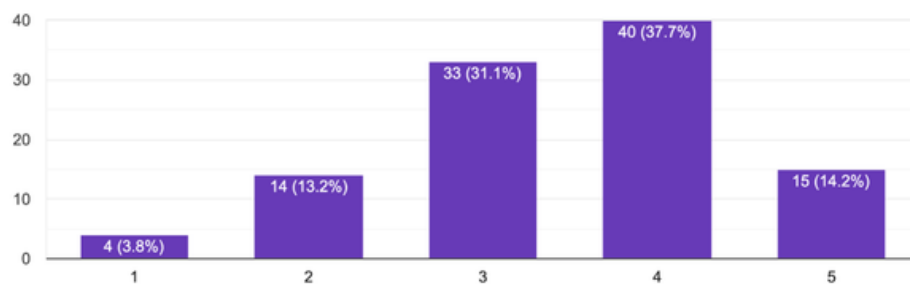


Q26: No matter what ordinary people do, powerful interests will always win.

A26:

No matter what ordinary people do, powerful interests will always win

106 responses

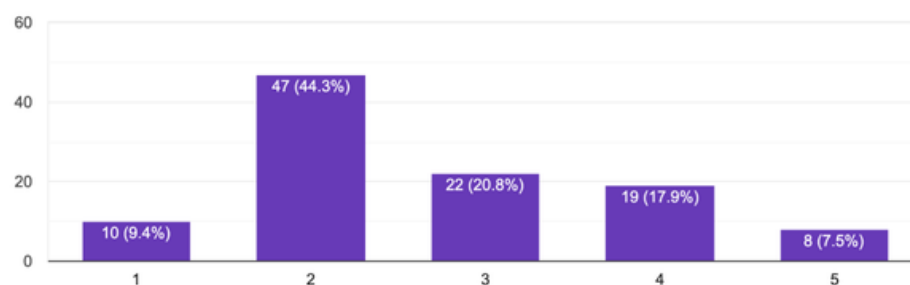


Q27: The political system is too broken to be fixed.

A27:

The political system is too broken to be fixed.

106 responses

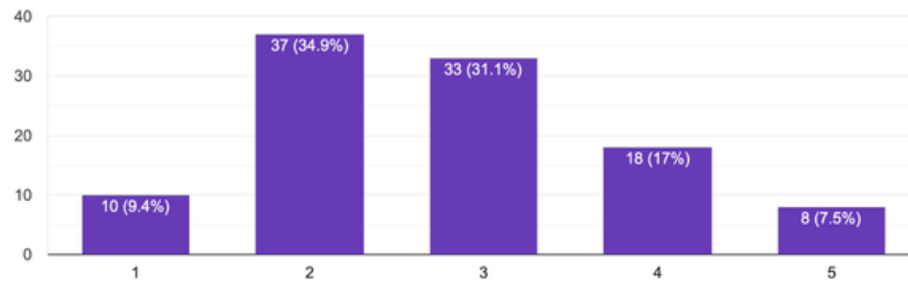


Q28: Elections in the U.S. are run fairly.

A28:

Elections in the U.S. are run fairly

106 responses

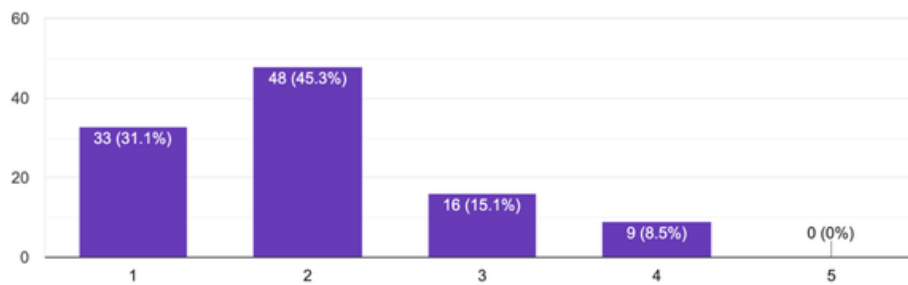


Q29: How much confidence, if any, do you have in **the Federal Government** to act in the best interest of the public?

A29:

How much confidence, if any, do you have in the Federal Government to act in the best interest of the public?

106 responses

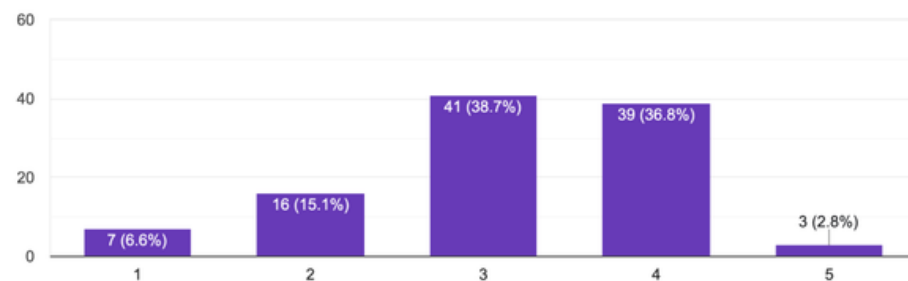


Q30: How much confidence, if any, do you have in **my State Government** to act in the best interest of the public?

A30:

How much confidence, if any, do you have in my State Government to act in the best interest of the public?

106 responses

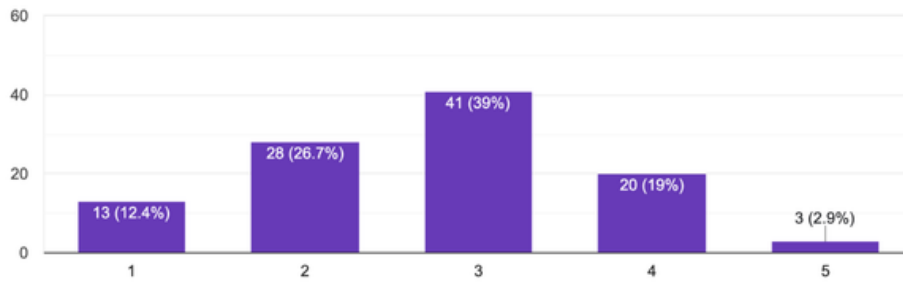


Q31: How much confidence, if any, do you have in **my Political Party** to act in the best interest of the public?

A31:

How much confidence, if any, do you have in my Political Party to act in the best interest of the public?

105 responses

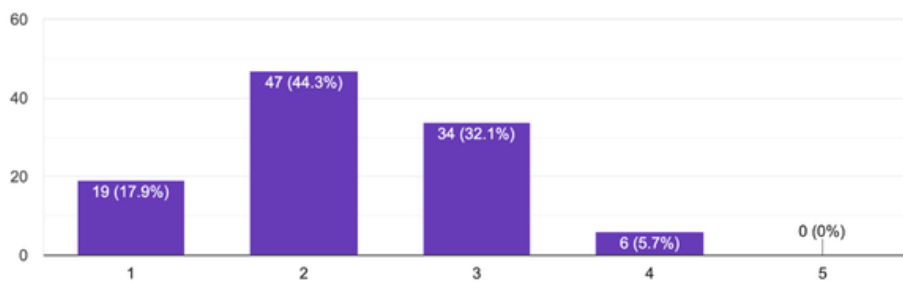


Q32: How much confidence, if any, do you have in **Congress** to act in the best interest of the public?

A32:

How much confidence, if any, do you have in Congress to act in the best interest of the public?

106 responses

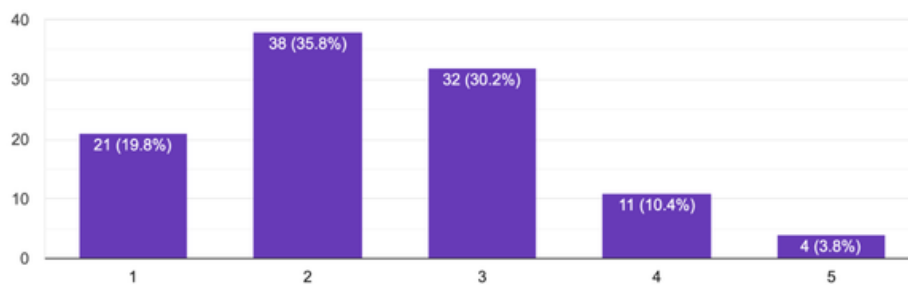


Q33: How much confidence, if any, do you have in **the Supreme Court** to act in the best interest of the public?

A33:

How much confidence, if any, do you have in The Supreme Court to act in the best interest of the public?

106 responses

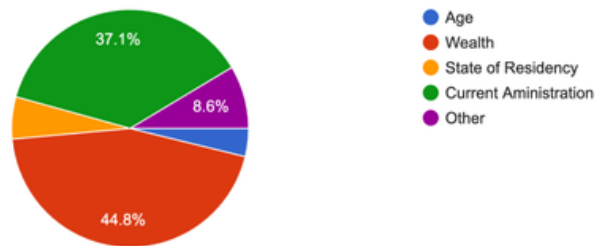


Q34: If anything, what do you think limits your political impact?

A34:

If anything, what do you think limits your political impact?

105 responses

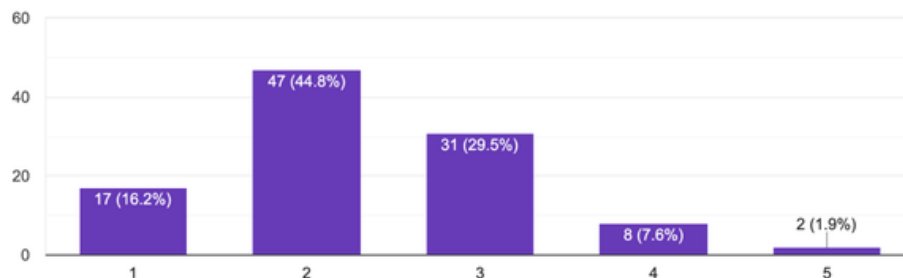


Q35: How do you feel about the future of American politics?

A35:

How do you feel about the future of American politics?

105 responses



The following are responses to the question, “Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

My opinion: Trump's actions and the lack of resistance that we are seeing from the Supreme Court and Congress are a threat to the integrity of our democracy. We can only hope that Midterms turn things around. In the meantime, we need more people to be actively aware of and engaged in politics.

Change is a large scale effort, but it's the change within the individuals that get us there.

I feel like people confused emotions with political messages and it significantly impacts their perspective and world views, if you look at this unbiased as much as you can and remove your personal circumstance it helps many see the world as a better place

Citizens United was the end of popular democracy in the United States. Money has more political influence than the people of this country can ever hope to have unless Citizens United is overturned and regulation to limit the influence of money in elections is put in place. Trump and Musk and their buddies bought the Presidency.

It's shocking how quickly the guardrails of democracy eroded without a trace. Parallels with historic dictatorships are very real.

I do think that I may be a biased respondent to this survey, given that I am an elected official within the Democratic Party, as well as a member of the leadership of a significant number of political organizations. I think I answered fairly, but I also feel like I (perhaps not incorrectly, but certainly with a perspective that 18-26 year-olds tend not to have) can most definitely make a difference as I have been making a difference. Reflecting on my beliefs, I did have these beliefs on effectiveness, advocacy, and participation prior to my own involvement, and I actually do think that those beliefs are what allowed me to reach the level of involvement I am currently at. I hope that makes sense.

I would say that I am extremely pessimistic about the future wellbeing of our society and politics, but I am even more pessimistic about the apathy that seems to be so prevalent in my generation. It makes me question our ability to correct path in the future, but I am still guided by a belief that, even though it is immensely challenging due to entrenched interests, it is possible to elect better leaders who can show that doing good things is not impossible if you are actually trying.
Confused by the "3" in the 1-5 scale. Is it neutral, or "some" level of confidence, hope, etc. (Question dependent)
I feel like we have reached a point of near fascism and Americans cannot protest or engage in politics due to being unable to survive if not working constantly. I feel the Democratic Party is too weak to make any real change.
I know I seem fairly pessimistic throughout this but I do believe there is a way to change, we are just at a very stagnant point politically where parties refuse to work with each other and the people refuse to recognize the true enemies (which is like the ultra wealthy) I do think there is stuff to be done but people right now don't have the time to invest as much as they need to in politics and that is (in my opinion) by design. You can't make a change because you need to put food on the table and you need to work super hard to put food on the table because you can't make a change!

9.2 Interviews

I1 (Interview 1)

Q1: When you think about politics in the US right now, what feelings come to mind?

A1: A lot of uncertainty at this moment, probably. Every now and again I see something about the developing war situation and I think, "Oh, wow, that is a lot to think about." A lot of what people talk about I see is oil prices or gas or whatever. What I see day-to-day is not a lot, but it's more of the idea of it happening concurrently — I don't know, a bit of an overload maybe. I don't keep it on my mind too much, but I do try to pay attention when something comes up.

Q2: Can you elaborate on that feeling of overloadedness?

A2: When I see certain news accounts talking about it, or a summary of what happened over the last day, I'm like, "Whoa, how did we even get here?" There's just so much context and information that I feel like I'm missing, and I'm just unsure of what to totally think about everything. Obviously there might be parts where I can formulate an opinion, but then I'm also like, "What brought us here in the first place, and why are we doing this?"

Q3: In your own words, what does having agency mean in your life right now?

A3: Just the ability to freely go anywhere and kind of do what I need to do and not worry about where I'm going specifically or potential danger. If I was in a place that was under threat of attack, that would very much affect my sense of self-agency. Freedom of movement and safety, basically.

Q4: What does political self-agency look like for you?

A4: That would be my ability to have my own opinions on politicians or whoever, and to freely hear information about them that is critical — not only to observe things that are in service of them or in favour of them. Having perspective, especially on people who are at the peak of power.

Q5: How does social media shape how powerful or powerless you feel politically?

A5: When I see big drops of information, I'm like, "Wow, the individual person really can't do anything about that." But then you look into it and see how many accounts talk about it, how many interactions it has, people talking about it in comment sections, the reposts and shares. Knowing that there are a lot of people seeing it and supporting it can be beneficial, even if as an individual you feel like you can't do anything — knowing that everybody out there feels a certain way about a topic in agreement with you is a powerful thing.

Q6: Do you feel politically hopeless?

A6: I don't think so. I still have faith in parts of the system, at least, that some aspects definitely do hear the needs of the people and will serve to that end. I don't think on a total scale I would consider myself politically hopeless.

I4 (Interview 4)

Q1: When you think about politics in the United States right now, what feelings come to mind?

A1: Bad and evil. It just feels so lacking in any agency from any direction, whether that's from unhappy constituents or from actual politicians. It feels so stagnant when it should not be stagnant, especially right now — especially with how right-wing things are going and with how much actually bad policy is being enacted. Even if I can ignore my personal dislike of what's happening, the policy is just so terrible for the majority of people who need good policy right now. Not seeing anything happen is so frustrating and demotivating. Obviously I will keep voting, but it's like, why do I want to vote for a system where my vote doesn't actually matter and where the politicians I vote in do nothing?

Q2: In your own words, what does having agency mean in your life right now?

A2: Just quite literally being able to choose. At our age we don't really think of agency in terms of picking where we want to buy our house or where we want our big career — it's more just kind of the smaller things that we feel like we have control over, like where we go to college, or if you go to class that day. Politically it's like turning up to elections or if you choose to go to a protest. My personal agency right now is generally just what grocery store I go to to buy my chicken — but knowing that I have that freedom and that my ability to make decisions has an impact on my life, that's the biggest part of it.

Q3: Tell me about the last time you did something related to a political issue you care about.

A3: Every so often when I get bored I call up a senator or a representative and leave a very strongly worded message. Does very little, I think, but I like to think that I do something. Also, being in California — there are a lot of networks telling your friends or people that you know in regions more affected by ICE, "Hey, they're here, maybe stay home." That was a big part of my winter break — just calling people and saying, "Don't leave your house, don't open the door, because people have seen them outside."

Q4: Have there been times you chose not to engage?

A4: Choosing to call people instead of actually going to cities — a lot of people are actively protesting, and you just see people getting shot, getting tear-gassed, getting hit with really scary batons. Or just not seeing an outcome at all — even when you see someone get shot in the street and nothing happens, that officer doesn't even necessarily get long-term incarceration. Do I want to put myself at risk for that if nothing will change? That lack of cause and effect has stopped me, but also just general safety concerns right now.

Q5: How does social media shape how powerful or powerless you feel politically?

A5: It does both of those things in such great magnitudes at the same exact time, in a way that's so disorienting. It affirms what you want in any capacity — whether you're far left, far right, or centrist, it will affirm what you want. In that you can feel a sense of community — you can find people that align with you. But when you start seeing the other side, you just feel so helpless that there are these huge pockets of people who think this. You just feel so helpless by how much people create these weird little nitpicky bubbles that don't really feel based in reality.

Q6: What does political hopelessness mean to you?

A6: It's the hopelessness that constituents or voters face — the feeling that you're losing your agency or that it doesn't matter as much. Our political system is kind of designed to make people feel hopeless — with the popular vote not actually really mattering at all, you just have to hope that the delegate representing your district votes the way you want.

Q7: Do you feel politically hopeless?

A7: Yeah. I feel like I don't really believe that my political opinions or what I do matters. So I guess by my definition, yeah, I feel politically hopeless.

I5 (Interview 5)

Q1: When you think about politics in the United States right now, what feelings come to mind?

A1: A lot of anger, which I'm sure is a popular point. A lot of frustration on the level of manipulation and the things that they're getting away with. The biggest one is anger and frustration — I'm angry at our congressional members, especially the Democrats, for not sticking up. The fact that we had Democrats voting for an ICE bill is insane to me. I'm angry that committees are powerless to do anything, that there are plants everywhere, that we're heading towards an oligarchy and that oligarchal members of our society are in governing bodies. I feel quite hopeless with fixing anything.

Q2: In your own words, what does having agency mean in your life right now?

A2: Just having the feeling that I have some level of control over the effects or outcomes of my actions. Whether or not that's true and the scale to which it is applied is negotiable, but just the feeling that you have faith in your actions and that something is coming out of it that you wish, no matter how small — that's how I would define agency for me. So just little things, whether that's groundwork, whether that's calling your representatives. You could say you have some agency, but I would say it's quite minimal currently.

Q3: How do you engage politically?

A3: First up is being informed. Recently I've been going over a lot of committee work on the Democratic side, on what they're doing or trying to do to mitigate the efforts of the Trump administration — whether it comes to labour, security, immigration, all of that. Second, trying to get involved even if it's small — volunteering or calling anyone. Also engaging with social media while being aware that feeds are curated and the algorithm is by no means independent, but keeping up with congressional members and double-checking facts you see online, while also being aware of certain stories that you aren't seeing otherwise.

Q4: Would you say being an informed citizen is political engagement?

A4: Absolutely. I think one of the reasons we have the Trump administration back is because so many people — through no fault of their own — are not informed, do not understand our government systems, do not understand the rights they have. So many people don't understand what feminism means, what socialism means, what universal healthcare means. It's not their fault — it's hard to assign blame — but education on political systems is inherently political and it's something everyone deserves to have access to.

Q5: How do you become an informed citizen, and how do you know that you are genuinely informed?

A5: It's hard to say. I think becoming an informed citizen, sometimes you're just lucky. If you grow up in certain areas, you've always valued keeping up with the news, looking at different news sources, not just looking at one magazine, looking at international magazines, looking at more local magazines, learning about the political systems outside of the headlines. So I think that's just luck. Learning the ability to critically think about what you're reading and to assess what you're reading and to question what you're reading is a skill that doesn't just come with following news headlines — it comes with how you were raised, the systems you were introduced to when you were young, and the values you grew up with. Unfortunately, not everyone was able to grow up with those values.

Q6: What does political hopelessness mean to you?

A6: One of the things I think is very important for American democracy to work is to feel like you have a voice — it's what brings people to the polls, makes you feel like you connect with your politicians, makes learning about Congress feel accessible. Political hopelessness, to me, is understanding all of that, seeing how Congress works, what legislation is getting passed, how you can get involved — and seeing that nothing changes. Even the little changes don't amount beyond a report or an address or a call to action. So political hopelessness is understanding how your government works and realising that even though you do, there's nothing you can participate in to change anything — a lack of faith in the democratic process.

I8 (Interview 8)

Q1: When you think about politics in the United States today, what feelings or reactions come to mind?

A1: Frustration.

Q2: In your own words, what does having political agency mean in your life right now?

A2: Not very much, because I don't think my vote will make much of a difference — although I vote on principle. I'm a blue voter in a blue state, and with the Electoral College, my vote won't count at the presidential level. And as Congress has seen fit to give away all its power to the executive, my vote doesn't matter that much for the country's policy.

Q3: How do you usually engage politically?

A3: By expressing my opinion — not necessarily in the most pointed fashion — and by voting. Mainly by voting. There isn't that much room for political engagement most of the time for the average person, I think.

Q4: Do you ever hold back your political views?

A4: I constantly hold back. I was talking the other day with some people who think that Iran bombing Israel is "divine justice," and I disagree very firmly. But for a functional society, one has to be able to interact normally with people with whom one disagrees very significantly. So it's better to meet people halfway than to just write them off.

Q5: Do you engage in political discussions or activism on social media?

A5: Rarely. Especially this year — I thought, well, if I ever want to work in a state-related function, then frankly anything you say can be taken out of context and distorted to make you look like anything. So it's frankly dangerous to interact politically online. I think it's very dangerous to your career.

Q6: Do you feel like your government works to address the needs of people like you?

A6: No, not presently. It's just not profitable to do so. And at any point where they do believe they're acting in my interests, I don't think they're going about it in a constructive way. I have no doubt that deep down, certain people think that bombing Iran and provoking Iran into closing the Strait of Hormuz is for the benefit of the average American, but it's probably not.

Q7: Do you ever experience political hopelessness?

A7: I think the average American is fully aware of how little importance their vote has, and that's part of the reason why so few Americans vote to begin with. We can distinguish between political relevance and political efficacy — my vote can perhaps be of some use, but I don't think it's going to amount to much. You could say I don't believe I have any power, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to continue to engage in the political process. I don't know how you define not believing that anything you do will amount to anything, but nevertheless trying — though some would say that despair entails complete inaction.

I9 (Interview 9)

Q1: When you think about American politics right now, what feelings come to mind?

A1: Destruction, horrible decisions, corruption, a lack of helping the American people.

Q2: In your own words, what does having agency mean?

A2: Being able to have a lot of pathways and different lifestyle choices — freedom of movement, freedom of expression, freedom of thought. Basically having a lot of avenues to live your life in lots of different ways in whatever ways are most fulfilling to yourself.

Q3: How do you engage with politics?

A3: Besides taking courses on it and discourse through classes, talking about politics with friends and family. And I always vote. Probably should be doing more than just that, but mainly talking with people within my circle about politics and why it matters.

Q4: Do you engage in social media activism, and do you think it makes an impact?

A4: Occasionally I'll find myself getting in an argument with someone online about something political, but it's not very often, and when I do I don't think it's very productive. I'll repost things on my story or on TikTok or Instagram — I'm somewhat active in reposting things, but I don't think that classifies as actual activism. It's a very passive form — it's sort of attaching your name to a position.

Q5: Do you feel like your government works to address your needs?

A5: To some extent yes, but it fails in a lot of ways too. The biggest failing is healthcare — the US is ranked horribly in child mortality and healthcare in general. Way too much money is spent on the military, which could fund things like free healthcare or better public transportation. And all the bombings and the illegal acts — these things cost taxpayer dollars which could be reinvested in actually helping citizens.

Q6: Do you feel politically hopeless?

A6: In the United Kingdom, I would say no. In the United States, I would say yes. The UK is trending more towards a multi-party system. In the United States it really feels like, no matter what you do — especially in the two-party system, which is so corrupt and infiltrated by money and controlled by corporate interests rather than the interests of people — it's like bad and much worse, and there's no good option. There's no way to actually put your political agency out there on the national scale. I'm more likely to believe in my town paving a pothole than my country not bombing Iran.

I10 (Interview 10)

Q1: When you think about politics in the United States right now, what feelings come to mind?

A1: There are a bunch of feelings that come to mind. Anger, a little bit of rage sometimes, sadness, frustration, anxiety. At the same time there are certain things I try to be hopeful about, or that do give me a little bit of hope. But I'd say in the last few months it has been overwhelmingly more negative.

Q2: In your own words, what does having agency mean in your life right now?

A2: I try to frame agency in ways that make it more tenable. My friend and I have the conversation all the time that joy is a form of resistance, or happiness is a form of resistance — so just finding the little ways I can make myself happy, spending time with friends, trying to enjoy my life. I also think about how important it is for me to stay educated. I'm not in a position of power where I can make or advocate for systemic change, but I can educate myself, engage my friends and family in more difficult conversations, and try to spread awareness to spark conversations. Sometimes it does feel sad, because it feels like people at the top don't really care too much about the people they were voted to represent.

Q3: Tell me about the last time you did something related to a political issue you care about.

A3: Research. Immigration is probably one of the top issues I care really deeply about, so I've been trying to focus most of my research papers on immigration from different perspectives, using different theorists to better understand it. We've also been trying to schedule events for Women in Politics to help undergrads be prepared for what it means to work in that space. In my undergrad I was also editor-in-chief of a social justice magazine where I'd pick a different social justice issue every semester and research it. Mainly through going to events, planning events to spread awareness, and through research.

Q4: Have there been times you decided not to engage politically?

A4: Yes. With certain family members, or people who I know are not actually open to having a conversation, where I just feel a little overwhelmed or tired and think, "It's not worth it right now," because I know I won't be as articulate as I would be in a better headspace, and I know they're probably not willing to engage and it may just become an argument. There are also certain social situations — if my boss makes a comment along those lines, I might be slightly less inclined to engage. It depends a lot on the power dynamics and the social situation.

Q5: How does social media shape how powerful or powerless you feel politically?

A5: It has a big impact. For about eight months up until December, I had deleted my Instagram because my feed is quite political, and scrolling through it would make me feel even more enraged and deeply sad. There were times I'd be in the library and just start crying looking at reels because I was so overwhelmed by everything going on. I tried downloading it again for about a month and then recently deleted it again, because I just can't have it on my phone. I definitely feel better not having it on my phone. It impacts the way people feel especially when you're exposed to it 24/7 and can't create space for yourself — for me it resulted in this constant anxiety, fear, frustration, and sadness that didn't really go away.

Q6: Do you think political discussions or activism on social media can lead to change?

A6: Yes. My family is quite conservative and I grew up conservative as well. When COVID happened and everything was happening in the US with Black Lives Matter — George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and all the killings — I was engaging a lot with different creators and activists online. Through hearing their stories and thinking differently about events and trying to consider other perspectives, it totally changed my own relationship with politics and helped me figure out what I actually believe. It inspired me to do my own research and ended up completely changing my political beliefs. You just have to be careful and set bounds with yourself about how you use it.

Q7: Do you feel like your government works to address the needs of people like you?

A7: No. I feel like the federal government is quite corrupt, and that people in power just care about their own power — not the power of the public or the people they were elected to represent. Time and again, a lot of the policies that have been released don't really address the needs of US citizens. Representing people is not a priority for those in power — they're more concerned about their own power and money, and remaining in power.

Q8: Do you ever experience political hopelessness?

A8: Yes, I experience it quite frequently — multiple times a week, if not every day. It sometimes just feels like there's nothing much I can do to fix things. And it's also frustrating that people aren't really willing to listen — I've been called a "leftist" in a negative, dismissive way, accused of being anxious and not rooting my analysis in fact or evidence, called dramatic for pointing out that some of Trump's behaviours and policies are authoritarian in nature. I do think that's changed somewhat in the last few months — more and more people have reached a breaking point.



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