

# Looking Forward with Gen Z

## A Gen Z Research Report

murmuration

Conducted in Partnership with

WALTON FAMILY  
FOUNDA TION

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# INTRODUCTION

# Lots of people are talking **ABOUT** Gen Z. Far fewer are talking **TO** young people. That has to change.

From the Harvard Youth Poll to Deloitte's Global Survey, excellent contributions by the Pew Research Center and myriad other studies and surveys, there's a growing body of work that has helped to make us aware of Generation Z's (who we also refer to as Zoomers throughout this report) values, their political activity, and interests. Understanding this generation of young people is only part of the challenge, however. We must also prepare ourselves, and our institutions, for a future where Zoomers are increasingly in positions of leadership and influence – and that includes helping them to attain those critical roles. We must find ways to listen and thoughtfully engage with the members of Gen Z, as co-workers, classmates, and neighbors, so that future plans for every sector of our society are being developed collectively.

## Through our research we have identified three important themes:

### **1 FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND MENTAL HEALTH COME FIRST**

Young people prioritize their own health and happiness, and the health and happiness of their friends and family, over getting involved in politics, advocacy, or other efforts. They care deeply about the issues our society is grappling with (inequality, racism, school shootings, climate, democracy, etc.), but they don't always have the bandwidth to do both. Having seen the challenges that their parents have faced, and in many cases the limits on their ability to drive the meaningful change they seek, they are choosing to make sure they are okay before considering anything else. The investments we make to ensure more and better support for mental health, and the rebuilding of a sense of community throughout the country, will help to unlock the tremendous power that Zoomers possess.

### **2 INSTITUTIONS ARE IN TROUBLE, THEIR REPUTATIONS ARE AT RISK, AND TRUST MUST BE REBUILT**

Zoomers have low expectations that the government, corporations, and other institutions will prioritize them or take their needs into consideration. They see the purpose of education to prepare them, in very practical ways, for life after high school – and yet, overwhelmingly they feel like their K-12 education did not prepare them adequately to enter today's world. They report that political and government leaders are not considering their needs when setting priorities, and instead favor the elite and overtly partisan opinions. Gen Z will soon be the largest cohort of eligible voters in the country – and they do plan to vote – giving them tremendous power to remake institutions in ways that support their vision for the future.

### **3 TIME FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT – GEN Z IS CHARTING A DIFFERENT COURSE**

Success for America's rising generation is defined as living a basic, balanced life that enables one to afford a stable home, but also provides the flexibility to travel, explore their passions, and spend time with family and loved ones. They talk openly about not wanting to follow the path of their parents and grandparents – working to exhaustion, with little time for family and individual pursuits, pledging loyalty to one job or industry, etc. This gives them motivation to challenge tired corporate policies and redefine work-life harmony.

## Why we conducted this research

Murmuration's mission is to transform the politics of K-12 public education so that every child in America has access to equitable and high-quality public schools. We partnered with the Walton Family Foundation because we shared an interest in the increasingly important role that Gen Z plays in our nation and wanted to further the conversations about Gen Z's role in society. To do that, we specifically embarked on a project that builds on previous research and adds depth and color to vital questions:

- How does Gen Z see themselves and their future?
- What are their goals for the next stage of their personal and professional lives?
- What are the essential issues they believe America must address?
- How did their K-12 education prepare them for these and other challenges; and
- What do they expect from older generations? From the government? From corporations? From educational institutions? From society at large?

Because this research builds on a wealth of insights, we were able to focus on generating data that would inform actionable recommendations. We prioritized questions that we felt would benefit business, political, government, social sector, and community leaders and institutions. And we had conversations that provided important insights to help shape approaches that can generate forward progress.

## What this research entailed

This research project was led by longtime Murmuration collaborator, SocialSphere's John Della Volpe, the founder and director of the Harvard Youth Poll and author of the critically acclaimed [\*\*FIGHT: How Gen Z is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America\*\*](#). The focus of the study was young people, ages 15-25. It was conducted in two phases:

- 1** Four large, town hall-style focus groups conducted in Houston, Atlanta, Columbus, Ohio – and supplemented by two small groups of Zoomers living in Arkansas (N=60).
- 2** The qualitative phase was followed by an extensive national survey of Americans between 15 and 25 (N=3,085), and people over age 25 for comparison (N=1,108). The survey was fielded between May 27 and June 4, 2022.

## What happens next

This one study will not answer all the questions that we have for, or about, the members of Gen Z. Murmuration has already begun a next phase of research to further explore the findings that were surfaced as part of this project, and to begin developing specific messages and frames that we believe can help CEOs, political and government actors, education champions, and other key leaders and institutions to communicate with, and to Zoomers. **We see tremendous potential to engage Zoomers as never before, getting them involved and working together to reshape our society in the years ahead.**

# PREAMBLE: REINTRODUCING GEN Z

# Gen Z Has Gone (and Is Going) Through A LOT

Gen Z is now 70 million strong, and is considered to be the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in American history. [Pew](#) notes that a “bare majority” are White, (52% are non-Hispanic white, compared to 61% of millennials in 2002 when they were in the same age range), a quarter are Hispanic, 14% are Black, 6% Asian, and 5% are another race, ethnicity or mixed.

One of the many things that makes this generation of Americans unique is that Gen Z has come of age in a time of tremendous national chaos and trauma – but unlike other generations, Gen Z has not experienced a moment when America was united.

From the time they were very young, Zoomers lacked the sense of personal, financial, and physical security their parents’ and grandparents’ generations often took for granted. Some 80% percent of families [lost 20% of their wealth](#) (and tens of millions of homes) in the Great Recession between 2007-2009. By the time Zoomers were ready for school, red alert lockdown drills and school shootings were expected – and soon they would see too many members of their community lose battles to opioids and depression. All of this happened before the coronavirus lockdowns robbed them of critical time in the classroom and with friends. And, from the beginning, their experiences have been reflected through the lens of social media, giving them unprecedented access to diverse experiences and people, while also in some cases distorting their understanding and exacerbating their struggles.

Rather than withdrawing from public life, the collective research has shown that Zoomers have adopted a progressive, solutions-based political mindset. It has been these experiences, along with contentious and close elections for the White House, concerns about income inequality, climate change, systemic racism, and other events that have led to [record levels of youth participation](#) in both the 2018 and 2020 national elections.

Zoomers have proven to be a highly collaborative, self-reliant, and pragmatic generation, concerned not just about their own well-being, but wanting to lift up their friends and communities as well. These attributes have given Zoomers confidence to forgo traditional education, move between jobs, and set priorities that are different from generations that came before them. And by 2028, along with like-minded millennials, they will be the [largest group of eligible voters](#) in the country, giving them the potential for significant power and influence.

What does all this add up to?

## Generation Z will change everything (the question is how)

It’s already evident – from the pressure they are putting on employers, to their taking to the streets to protest gun violence or promote reproductive health, to voting – that Zoomers will have an outsized influence on the future of the nation, and society more broadly. What is less clear is the shape that those changes will take. This report explores four categories, on their own and in the relationship between them, where Zoomers have met resistance in pursuing their vision of a modern society:

**POLITICS:** Zoomers have turned out to vote in record numbers in consecutive elections (they delivered the White House and Senate to Democrats in 2020 and 2021); and in 2024, along with millennials, they will account for 40% of the electorate. The Harvard Youth Poll shows that across more than a dozen social, domestic, and global issues, they are more progressive than the previous millennial generation when they were the same age. Even among Republicans, [Gen Zers are less conservative than previous generations and take a more progressive stance on a number of social issues](#). For example, Gen Z Republicans are more likely to agree that Black people are treated unfairly in this country. They believe the government should play a greater role in solving problems, and they are more likely to attribute climate change to human activity, as opposed to natural patterns.

**SCHOOL and WORK:** Despite struggles that have emerged as a result of the pandemic, which have delayed or disrupted learning across the board, Zoomers have higher high school graduation rates and lower dropout rates than those who came before. And while they are heading off to college in high numbers, many are reevaluating the costs and benefits of traditional higher education given the dramatic rise in expenses and the impact of student loan debts. The cost-benefit considerations around higher education are that much more challenging since Zoomers do not feel prepared to succeed in these environments in the same ways that previous generations have.

**TECHNOLOGY and CULTURE:** Gen Z is the only generation to grow up entirely in the digital age; for better or worse, social media is not a tool, it's a part of their identity. This has altered the way they think and how they act relative to other generations. Whether it's a laptop in school or at work, a device always in hand, or a social platform being central to political engagement, Zoomers do not make a distinction between real or virtual life, even while older cohorts still struggle to reconcile the differences and manage the impact of a life turned increasingly transparent, connected, and social.

**FAMILY and COMMUNITY:** Zoomers value their relationships. Family, along with their hobbies and interests, are the most central elements of their personal identities. For most, sexual identity is more fundamental to who they are than college, socio-economic class, or political ideology. And mental health, where Zoomers have openly and transparently shared their struggles, informs every choice they make and connection they form at this stage of their lives.

Gen Z is beginning to reveal how they believe our nation and society should move forward. What is also apparent is that what Gen Z believes should happen does not, in many cases, align with the choices and priorities that today's decision-makers believe are important. That tension will define our politics, economy, institutions, and culture in the years ahead.

This research was developed to help ease those tensions, and provide CEOs, political and government actors, academic champions, and other leaders and institutions with guidance and insight. In the pages that follow we will detail the results of our research, what it means, and the actions we believe can be taken to better engage – and involve – Gen Z in shaping the future.

# SECTION 01

## IDENTITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

# Gen Z is Stressed and in Crisis (But Not Giving in)

At a time when it is challenging to find a consensus of opinion on nearly any topic, one theme that emerges from informal conversations, survey research, government- and healthcare-related data is that Gen Z is in the midst of a mental health crisis. In the spring 2022 edition of the Harvard Youth Poll, nearly three-quarters of young Americans (72%), and those on both sides of the aisle – 76% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans – agreed that “the United States has a mental health crisis.”

This “Looking Forward with Gen Z” survey found that relative to their elders over age 25, Gen Z is about twice as likely (42% to 23%) to battle depression and feelings of hopelessness. They are also three times as likely (18% to 5%) to say their challenges are so severe that they have had thoughts of self-harm or that they might be better off dead.

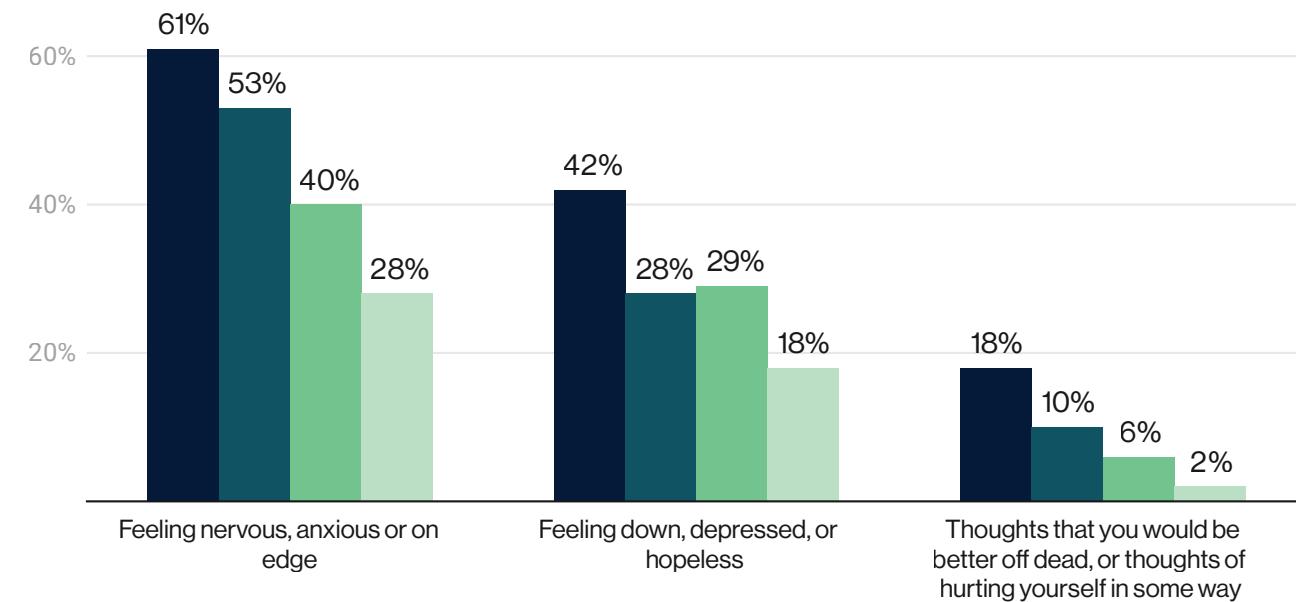
Across the board, more adolescents and young Americans are grappling with mental health and other challenging issues than those from older generations.

## Our poll also found:

- More than half of Zoomers (52%) know someone battling depression.
- One-third (32%) have someone close to them who has been a victim of sexual assault.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) have someone close to them dealing with opioid or other drug addiction.
- One-fifth (20%) know someone who has died by suicide.
- And 14% say they know someone who's been a victim of gun violence.

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

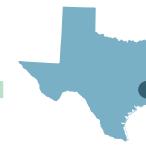
■ Gen Z (15-25) ■ Millennials (26-41) ■ Gen X (42-57) ■ Boomers/Silent (58+)



Net: At least several days  
Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

While every generation faces its share of challenges, the urgency and seriousness of what Zoomers are dealing with is stressing the systems designed to support and respond. Exacerbating the anxiety and fear of young Americans is a sense that parents, mentors, teachers, employers, and older generations more broadly are unable to understand, or worse, are dismissive of the depth of their struggles. A high school student from Houston articulated these frustrations in one of this study's town halls:

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**f f For me personally, over the last five years, I've lost three people to suicide or mental health, which is really crazy to me. And it's like where I go to school, my middle school and my high school are literally right across the street...where I grew up and am growing up, they don't understand kids nowadays have struggles. We struggle too. And it's hard for us to keep going and then have an adult be like, 'Well, what are you stressed about? You have nothing to be stressed about. You're a kid.' And it's like, I have many things to be stressed about."**

– High School Student, Houston

# Zoomers Want to Be Part of Something Bigger Than Themselves

While Zoomers are centered by a largely shared set of values and vision for what will make them happy and fulfilled, they are open to working with others to achieve a common goal. Using politics as an example, more than four in five agree (41% strongly and 42% somewhat agree) with the sentiment that “even if we disagree 90% of the time, it is important that we find the 10% of things we agree on so that we can make progress.”

Despite these ongoing struggles with mental health – and seemingly never-ending personal and public trauma – an integral and unique element of Gen Z’s identity is a calling to be part of something bigger than themselves. It would be understandable if Zoomers chose to shrink away given the challenges facing our society today, but our data shows that more than two-in-five strongly agree they want to make their community and country better – a number that exceeds millennials, Gen X, baby boomers and the silent generation.

While Zoomers struggle and often have their own bouts of anxiety and sense of hopelessness, their resilience and empathy more often than not shines through. Today, Zoomers see standing up for the voiceless as central to their identity, more than any other generation in America.

Standing up for those who are vulnerable, or without a voice is an important part of who I am.



## % who "Strongly Agree"

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# SECTION 02

## POLITICS, GOVERNMENT AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

# Gen Z is Losing Faith in Government and Politics (But Still Thinks Democracy is Important)

It has now been well documented that Gen Z and young millennials voted at historic levels in the last two federal elections. Their level of civic participation surpassed older millennials, Gen X, and baby boomers when they were younger. Additionally, it was youth's overwhelming support for Democrats in 2018 and 2020 that played an essential role in delivering the White House and Congress to Democrats in recent elections.

Less than two years later, along with scores of older Americans, Zoomers are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the trajectory of our politics and the nation. Only 7% describe the United States as a healthy democracy according to the fall 2021 Harvard Youth Poll.

Despite these concerns, Gen Z continues to engage at levels that exceed other generations when they were of similar age. The number of young people expected to vote is tracking more closely with historic 2018 turnout than with 2014 and prior elections. About half are regularly discussing politics with peers.

Through our qualitative and quantitative research, we see that Zoomers understand that robust government action is required to solve the systemic inequities and major challenges faced by our society. While Zoomers are dissatisfied and disappointed with the pace and scale of change in Washington, they believe America can only live up to its promise if they as young people continue to engage and fight. As a young woman from Atlanta explained in one of this study's town halls:



**Our generation wants the country to change for the better. And when given tools, education, resources, and making a choice to band together, we can make change.”**

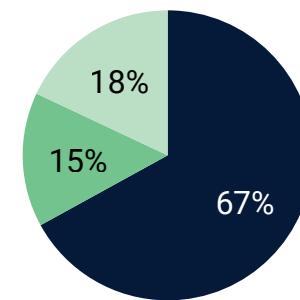
– Young Woman, Atlanta



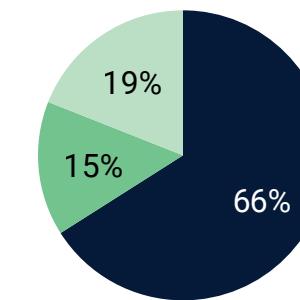
Many Zoomers described to us a desire to prioritize their own health and happiness before committing to civic action – because they understand that it will take all their energy and focus to drive the changes that are necessary to improve our society. Two-thirds of Gen Z reject the cynical argument that change is nearly impossible – Zoomers believe that the challenges we face are so urgent and great, they have no choice but to participate in every possible way. And 42% of Zoomers, more than any other generation, strongly agree with the sentiment that they want to be a part of something that improves their community and country.

Which statement is closer to your own view?

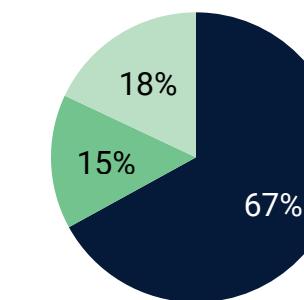
- Challenges are so great, must engage
- Nearly impossible, do not engage
- Don't know



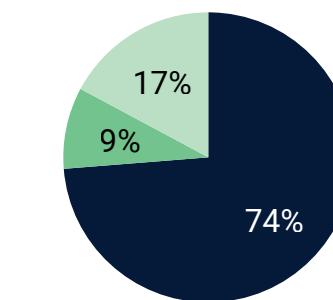
Gen Z (15-25)



Millennials (26-41)



Gen X (42-57)



Boomers/Silent (58+)

Some/Other people say the size and scope of the challenges facing America are so great, it is nearly impossible to solve them. They say one person can't really make a difference, so the wisest path is to focus on taking care of yourself and your family – and not engage politically. Other/Some people say that because the size and scope of the challenges facing America are so great, we have no choice but to engage in every way possible. They say that even though government is ineffective – we must engage politically, fight, and eventually change the system.

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# Zoomers Will Collaborate for Progress (But They Won't Compromise Their Values)

While economic issues related to inflation and the deeper trends associated with the cost of living weigh heavily on Gen Z, young Americans very clearly voice significant concerns in this moment about school shootings, and the erosion of fundamental rights and freedoms, which include access to clean water and fresh air, personal safety, a quality education, housing, and health care. They are loudly calling for political and government leadership to address these issues and are demanding big changes to these major problems.

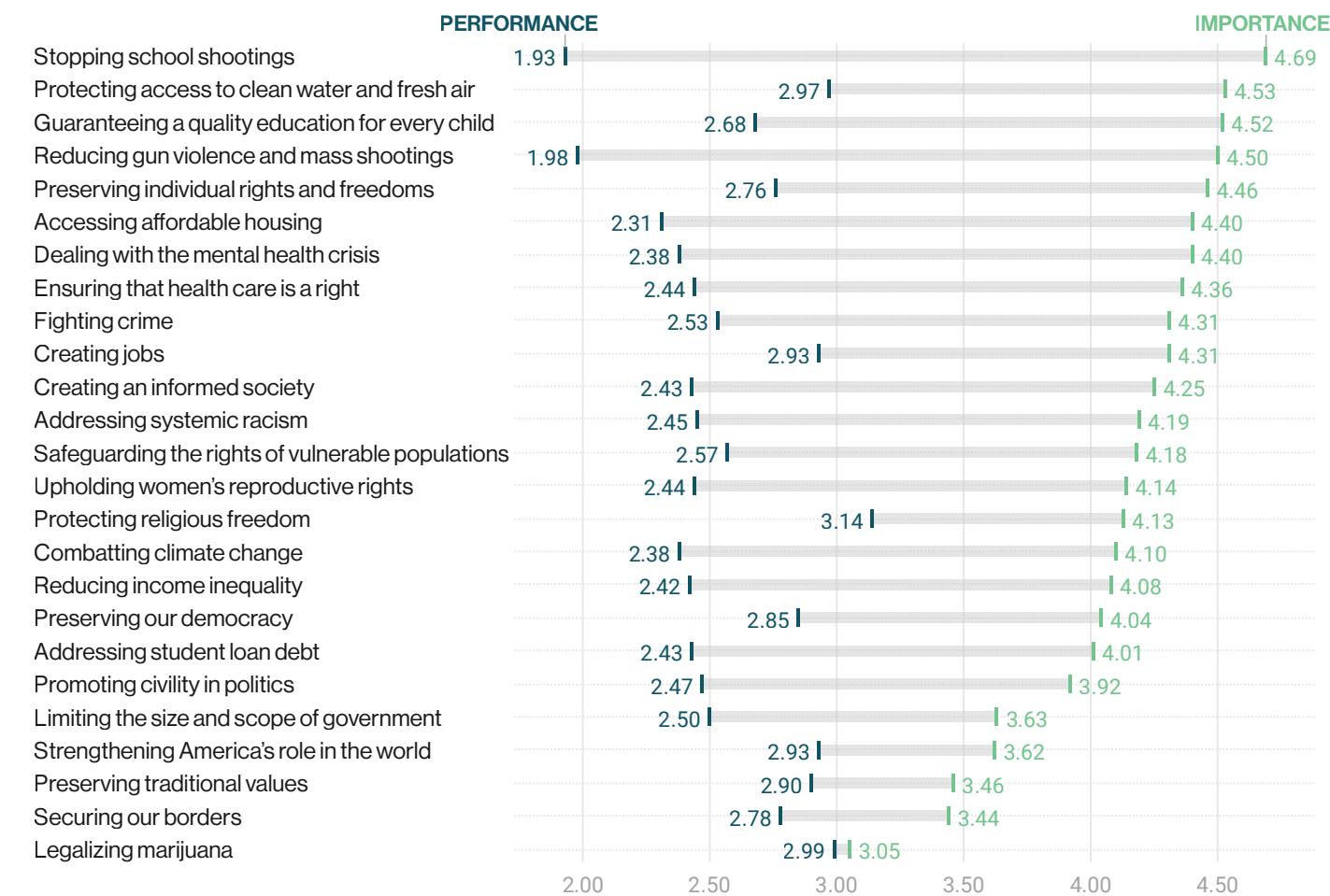
## At least two-thirds of Gen Z find the following to be very important issues facing America “right now”:

- Stopping school shootings (82% very important);
- Protecting access to clean water and fresh air (72%);
- Reducing gun violence and mass shootings (72%);
- Guaranteeing a quality education for every child (71%), and
- Preserving individual rights and freedoms (67%)

Public policy issues that many mistakenly believe drive Gen Z's engagement (legalizing marijuana, 23%), or animate older generations (limiting the size and scope of government, 26%, preserving traditional values, 29%, and securing our borders, 29%) ranked at the bottom of an expansive list of issues shared with survey respondents. Political leaders too often only talk to young Americans about these issues, ignoring the opportunity to engage them on more serious topics and would animate them and spark their interest in getting further involved.

The chart to the right ranks the importance of 25 issues impacting the kind of America in which Zoomers want to live “right now” – along with Gen Z's views of government performance in addressing each. The greatest gaps in the importance/performance grid are on the government's poor performance related to school shootings.

(A) Thinking about the kind of America in which you want to live – how important are the following issues to you right now? (B) How would you rate our nation's performance on each of these issues?



(A) Scale: 1 = Not important at all → 5 = Very important; (B) Scale: 1 = Poor → 5 = Excellent

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# Gen Z Don't Feel Heard or Valued

Most Zoomers do not believe that critical institutions and organizations are invested in listening to their voice and understanding the values of people like them. This is true broadly in education, but it also applies to employers, elected officials and candidates, and others.

Favorite brands (34%), local companies (34%), and local schools (32%) are considered most in touch – but still only about a third of Zoomers say they are doing an excellent or good job listening.

Global companies (24%), philanthropic organizations (26%), government (20%), and elected officials (18%) fare more poorly.

With the exception of government (47% fair or poor) and elected officials (48% fair or poor) which about half of Zoomers rate negatively – other institutions benefit from a high level of uncertainty. The reason? Without more access and information, Zoomers simply do not know enough to form an opinion, so organizations have an easier path to connecting and building trust.



**A lot of the folks that we see on TV, I don't think they represent what our voices go towards or what our opinions are going towards. They might represent an older generation, but even more so I don't want to generalize the older generation, but they represent a certain amount of people with an interest. They have ulterior motives, whether it for lobbyists or their personal gains.”**

– Young Woman, Houston

# **SECTION 03**

## **WORK & PRIORITIES**

# Gen Z Is Defining Success Differently (And Most Are Confident They Can Be Successful)

It is Gen Z's view of the world, not a quest for riches or the pressure applied by culture or friends, that affects most every personal, professional, and political decision they make.

According to [CareerBuilder](#), Gen Z's average length of time spent at a job is **2 years and 3 months**. For millennials (26-40) that figure is 2 years and 9 months, while Gen Xers (41-56) were at a job for an average of 5 years and 2 months, and baby boomers (57-75) spent 8 years and 3 months at a job. This begs the question, what is Gen Z looking for? What are their aspirations? And how do they define success not only professionally – but personally?

Raised in an era of considerable personal, financial and social volatility, Gen Z prizes independence, community, and work that is fulfilling over nearly everything else as they grow into independent, self-sustaining adults. A young woman from Atlanta offered the following at one of this study's town halls:



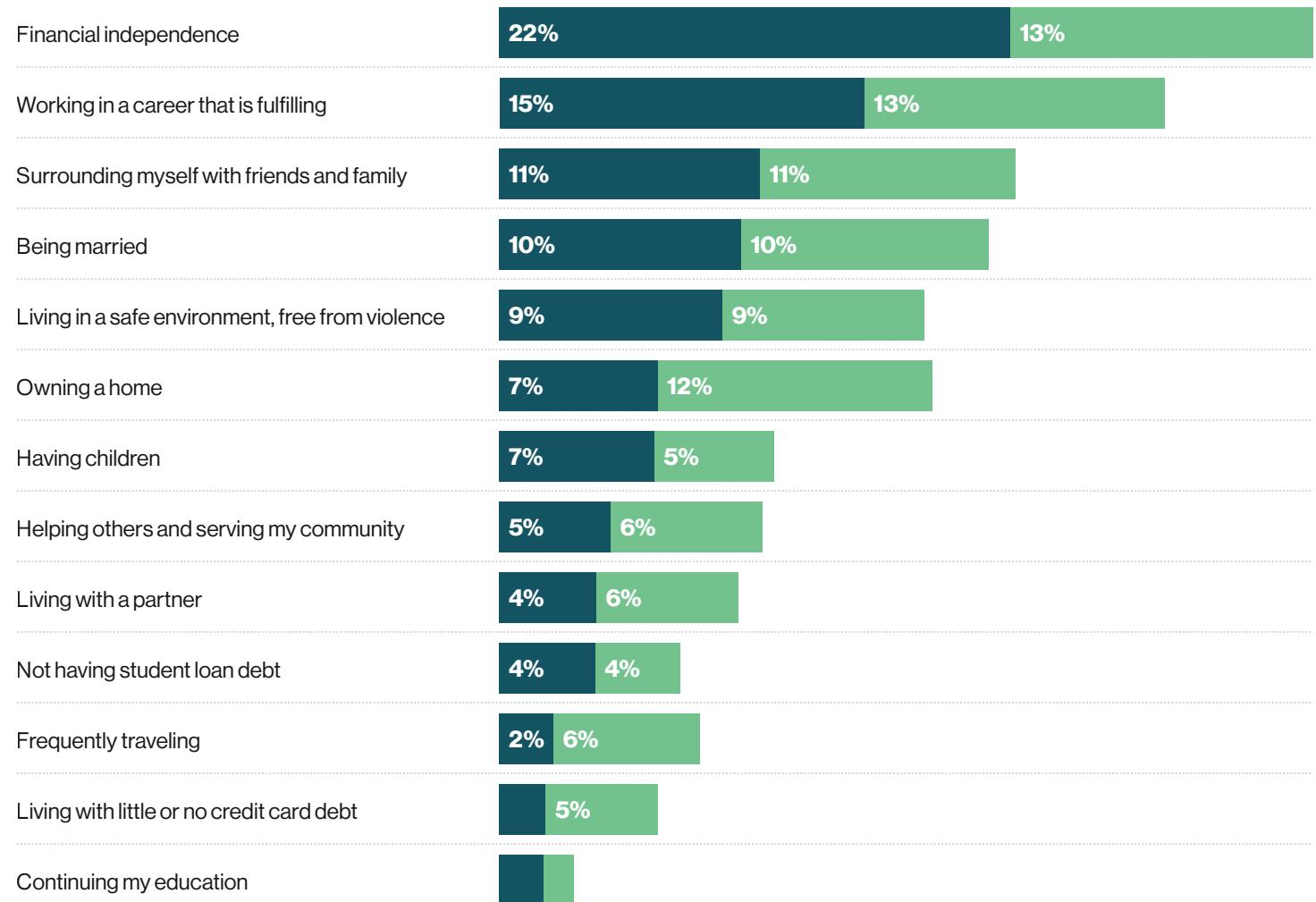
**“Our generation is more inclined to go after what we want. We’re not really scared to work outside of the box of what our parents want, or what other people want. We’re more likely to just do our own thing and stand on that.”**

– Young Woman, Atlanta

Asked to identify their aspirations by the time they reach age 30, Gen Z rated financial independence above all else (e.g., not being reliant on their parents, or a paycheck for survival). Gen Z females (74% compared to 60% for males) selected financial independence more than any other aspiration, while owning a home topped the list for Zoomer males (71% for both males and females). An ability to simply be financially secure – something that Boomers know eluded about half of millennials during the Great Recession – matched with a career or job that is fulfilling are the building blocks of how Gen Z defines success.

(A) When thinking about your aspirations for your life by the time you turn 30, what is the most important item on this list? (B) When thinking about your aspirations for your life by the time you turn 30, what is the most important remaining item on this list (second most important aspiration)?

■ Most important goal by 30 ■ 2nd most important goal by 30



Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# Gen Z is Not Interested in Their Parents' Jobs

As Deloitte reported, "Yes, money and salary matters the most to Gen Z. But because of the environment in which this generation came of age, other things matter too, such as work-life balance, flexible hours, perks, and benefits. More importantly, Gen Z feels itself in a position to get those perks from employers, in addition to salary." Often lost in the discussion and debate about returning to the office, remote or hybrid work is a fuller discussion about what Gen Z values in their work life.

Currently, over half of Zoomers between 15 and 25 are working either part-time or full-time jobs (52%) – with nearly a quarter (23%) working more than one job. Living up to their own standards, nearly two-thirds (62%) have found roles that leave them fulfilled.

Very few Zoomers that we interacted with through town hall meetings in Arkansas, Georgia, Ohio, and Texas showed an interest in the jobs that their parents once, or currently, hold. Gen Z is witnessing the regrets of their parents playing out in near real time; sacrificing family time and personal fulfillment for a work culture where the rewards are reaped by only a few. A young woman from Atlanta framed the situation as follows:



**We've got the technology and ability to realize that overworking yourself and forcing yourself to do things that you don't want to do, they're negatively affecting your health when you get older. And we're learning that from our parents and grandparents. And we're taking that and learning from that."**

– Young Woman, Atlanta

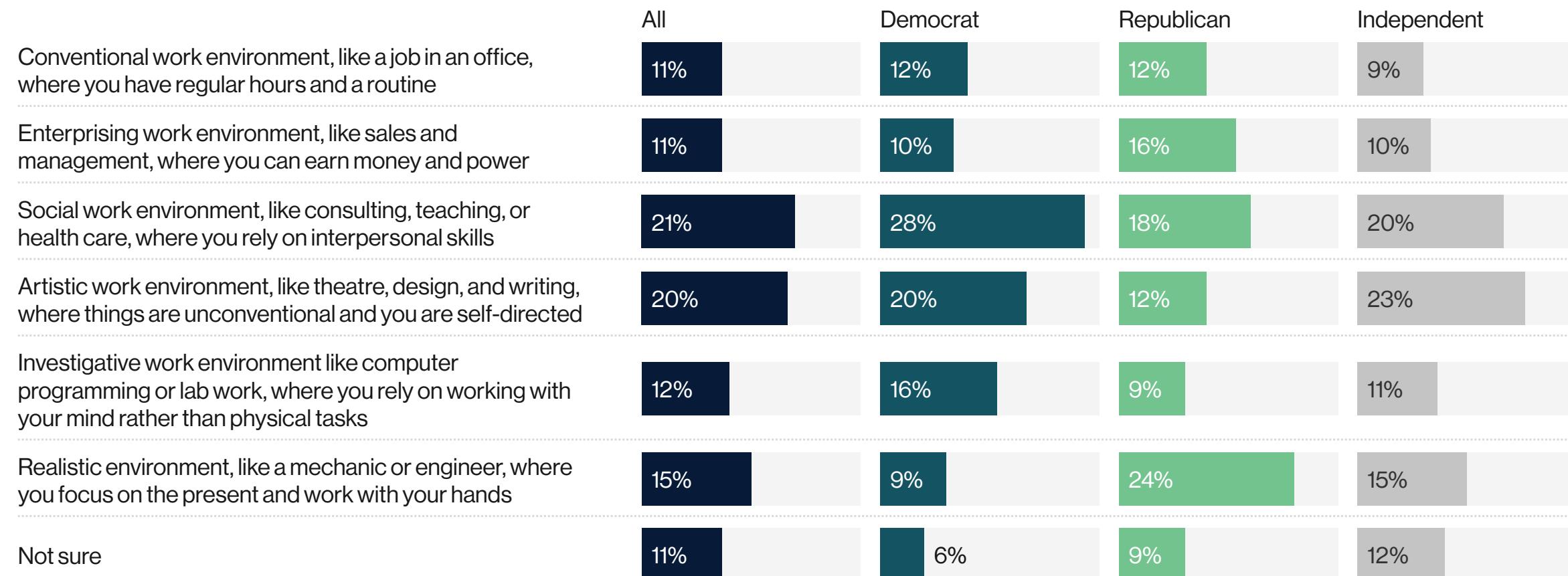
In contrast to the work of the previous generation, environments that are creative (20%), unconventional (21%), and employ social skills (20%) offer the most appeal to Gen Z. Only about one in ten are attracted to conventional office jobs (11%) or sales and management roles (11%).

With work driven by values, it is unsurprising that demographic and ideological attributes are predictive of work environment. For example:

- **Young men were predisposed to realistic (23%) environments while young women were split in their interest in social (28%) and artistic (24%) environments.**
- **Black respondents (15%) were more likely than White respondents (10%) to find enterprising environments appealing (and also were more likely to be unsure what they wanted, 17%).**
- **For Democrats, social work environments like consulting, teaching, or health care were most popular (28%); for Republicans, it was realistic environments (24%), like a mechanic or engineer, where the focus is on the present and work is with the hands were most popular.**

## Which of the following work environments is most appealing?

All Democrat Republican Independent



Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# Zoomers Are Not Living To Work, They Are Working To Live

Before the coronavirus pandemic, we saw tensions between young employees and traditional-minded companies rise over flexible work schedules and policies that influence work-life harmony. In the past few years, the Great Resignation has been fueled in large part by young people who believe there are better options available to them in the workforce.

Companies have been increasing compensation, but that only goes so far. In a recent [poll](#) of roughly 400 college seniors commissioned by ResumeBuilder.com, only about half (54%) said they'd be willing to work for a company they "morally disagree with" for a [six-figure starting salary](#). Meanwhile, in [a Deloitte survey in late 2021](#), 37% of Gen Zers said they have "rejected a job and/or assignment based on their personal ethics."

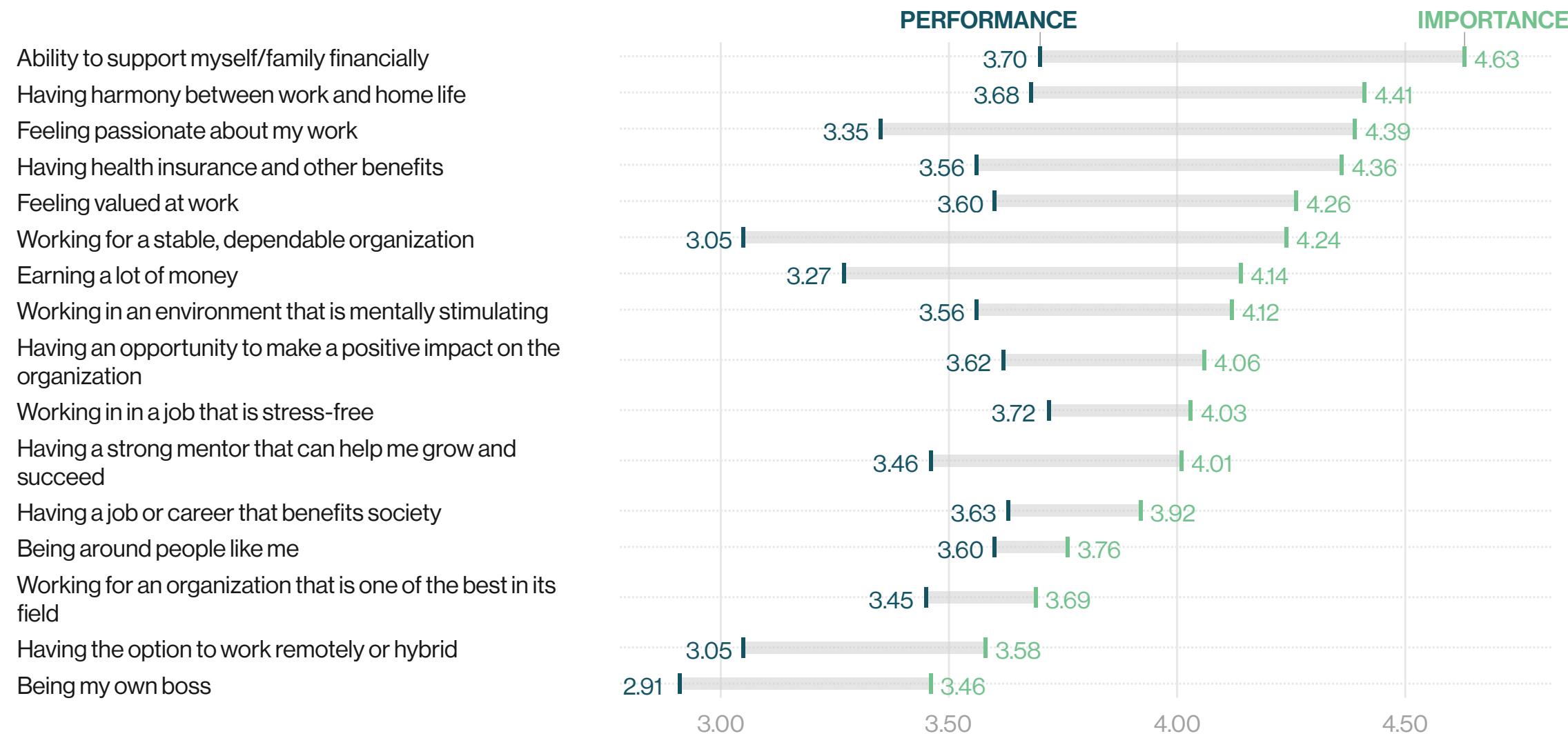
When Gen Z is asked to narrow their focus from life goals to career goals, we find that financial independence is prized above all else (79% very important), but money isn't everything. Zoomers express that the greater fulfillment they seek comes from having harmony between work and home life (61%), feeling passionate about their efforts (60%), having benefits (59%), and feeling valued (52%). The ability to work remotely or hybrid (25% very important) ranked at the bottom of a 16-item list – and is only a means to an end.



**“When I get off, I want to be strictly off. Jobs now, they want to pay you so little, but want you to take work home. I don’t want to do that. So I want to be able to put the time in, but also have flexibility. Even now, you have to take sick time off to go to a doctor’s appointment. They don’t just let you go to a doctor’s appointment.”**

– Female, 23, Columbus

Here are some goals that people may or may not value in their work life. (A) Please indicate how important each is to you...  
 (B) How would you rate your own progress in achieving the goals on this list?



(A) Scale: 1 = Not important at all → 5 = Very important; (B) Scale: 1 = Poor → 5 = Excellent

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# **SECTION 04**

## **EDUCATION**

# Zoomers Are Not Feeling Prepared For Life

The young people we met in town halls across the country all agreed that the purpose of K-12 education was to prepare individuals for adulthood and to position them to take advantage of the benefits available in society. When public education was defined as a basic American right for every child, the Zoomers we surveyed ranked education as one of the most important priorities in the country. A male teenager at a town hall in Houston explained the importance this way:



**“Education, that’s the foundation, especially in the US. Jobs and experience, cost of living... I mean, if you want to make more than minimum wage in this country, whether you like it or not, you got to have an education. It’s really the center of everything. Cost of living, healthcare, affording it, minimum wage, jobs. I feel like every single one of these has to do with education.”**

– Male Teenager, Houston

The natural follow up is to ask whether schools are fulfilling their purpose. In our surveys, just over half (51%) of Gen Z believed that their local schools prepared them well for success at this stage in their lives – but only 16% of 15 to 25 year-olds in the survey indicated that local schools prepared them “very well.” The remaining half of the sample reported that local schools did not prepare them well (16% not very well, 10% poorly) – or the more neutral response (neither well nor unwell, 24%). One young man from a town hall in Houston described education this way:



**“It doesn’t teach you about what you should do. Oh, you should open a bank account. You should save your money. You should save for retirement. You should set yourself up to do certain things, a certain type of way if you want to be successful.... ‘Does it prepare you for life?’ I will say, it does not.”**

– Young Man, Houston

Over the course of the survey, Zoomers were asked about the role education played to prepare them for specific elements of their lives. Unsurprisingly, Zoomers from families with significant financial struggles and who did not enroll in college were far less likely to say their education prepared them for various life challenges compared to those with greater financial means and education (40% and 43% compared to 57% and 59%). We found that the more specific the focus was on what is important, the more the K-12 education system's ratings suffered. For example:

**42%** Offered positive ratings (excellent or good) to their local K-12 schools for how they were prepared to succeed in their work-life.

**37%** Offered positive marks for how well they were prepared to be an active and engaged citizen.

**32%** Gave their local K-12 schools positive marks for their preparation to live a balanced and happy life.



Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

# **SECTION 05**

## **WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?**

As we said at the start of this report, lots of people are talking about Gen Z, but far fewer are talking to them and listening. That has to change. Why? Because Gen Z is primed to deliver changes across every sector, so their vision and values cannot be ignored. We are already seeing their influence in how businesses address social issues. They are on course, with millennials, to be the largest group of eligible voters in the country by 2028, meaning their priorities can reset the political dynamic across the country. Understanding the stresses, the perspective, and openness of Gen Z to find and connect around shared values presents an opportunity for the rest of us to engage and work together to build the future we aspire to. Ignoring them, and their interests, invites a challenge that will accelerate change, leaving those currently in positions of power in its wake.

## Some guidance in each of the areas where this research was focused:

**EDUCATION:** Ensuring that every child in the nation has equitable access to high-quality education is necessary in order to support our economic ambitions and preserve our national security. This has always been true, but the urgency of the challenge has never been greater. Zoomers are not entering adulthood feeling prepared to take advantage of the opportunities offered by our society. We need to make big changes to our education system, not incremental fixes, to ensure that younger Zoomers, and all future generations, are not put in a similar position.

The changes required are not just academic – schools must also address mental health issues, foster a greater sense of community, and do a better job supporting the transition from K-12 to higher education (for those who choose to pursue it), and professional life. Culture wars should not disrupt the work that needs to get done or we risk losing an entire generation of skilled workers, with significant consequences if we do. Now is the time for those who care about our children's futures, and those who recognize the importance of high-quality public schools to the functioning of our society, to invest and work together to expand and improve our education system. If we fail to meet this moment we will only have ourselves to blame.

**CORPORATIONS:** It can be uncomfortable for CEOs to try and manage the incoming wave of Gen Z workers. The only path forward to shared prosperity starts with listening and understanding Zoomer's values.

CEOs need to recognize that what they are doing is not working. Social responsibility campaigns or co-signing letters isn't enough for Zoomers. More must be done to change how you do business to fully embrace an identity aligned with Gen Z values of wellness, health, and family. That includes structuring work environments around greater flexibility, a focus on wellness, and whatever else is needed to ensure Zoomers can lead a full life of their own design.

**NOTE:** There have been some companies whose leaders embrace the need for change and have taken steps to reimagine their model to better align with the interests of Gen Z. Examples include Brian Cheksy at Airbnb, who argues [office designs are outdated](#) and has begun a complete overhaul, and Walmart CEO, Doug McMillon, who says [companies can no longer be silent on political issues](#), and that they must speak out to show their values in action.

Immediate action is required, or companies will miss out on talent and risk losing relevance with younger consumers. But the solution can not be cooked up in a boardroom, or outsourced to a group of management consultants. Zoomers will not accept a work model that is foisted upon them, they want to be involved in the design of the next model of work. So ask – ask employees, and customers, and influencers, and activists – and more to be involved. Build something new together.

**GOVERNMENT & POLITICS:** Hyper-partisanship has infected every element of our political system and become a barrier to government action. Meanwhile, there are serious issues – soaring inflation, ongoing supply-chain issues, a spike in violent crime, horrific school shootings, threats to reproductive health, the war in Ukraine, and challenges to our democracy here at home (to name just a few) that need to be addressed. Young people want to see that their elected representatives and political leaders listen. They want to see alignment, and a shared set of values with a plan of action.

To achieve that, government leaders and political actors need to reinforce how government and public policy are forces for good in people's lives. That includes focusing on the serious issues, not the culture war distractions. Gen Z expects big, bold ideas, not incrementalism, or empty promises.

Perhaps more importantly, we all must do whatever it takes to ensure that young people continue to believe in the importance of our democracy, the free press, and our political systems and institutions. Our future depends on Gen Z's willingness to participate in civic life, to vote, and to continue to push for solutions. That means we need to do more to show that their votes count, that the effort to become engaged is well spent, and that the system is there to serve their interests.

**TECHNOLOGY/CULTURE:** Gen Z will do more to shape our culture, and improve our relationship to technology, than any generation before them if we allow it to happen. Right now, too much attention is being put towards trying to regulate tech or shut down platforms – but those old models of control do not sync with the way young people view technology and social media. When you combine the high rates of depression with the isolation that many feel, millions of Zoomers are in danger of being left behind – and potentially fall victim to disinformation campaigns that can lead to dark, even extremist communities.

Instead of trying to dismantle the platforms and networks that power online community and connection, we must help to translate the diversity, sense of identity, and community that Gen Z feels online, and embraces, into real-life. We have to stop thinking about technology as a tool to be manipulated, and instead embrace the role it plays in our society. If we want social media to improve, put Gen Z in more direct control, involve them in the decision-making around the laws and regulations – don't try to do it "on their behalf."

# WHAT'S NEXT?

Murmuration is already conducting additional research specifically focused on how to further activate these insights and guide the actions and decisions of people in positions of authority across our society. That additional research will develop frames for talking about these issues, engaging and persuading Gen Z on different priorities and actions, and help to create connections that do not exist today.

But more research is not the answer on its own. We implore the CEOs, political and government leaders, education champions, and others to take action. Do not hesitate. Do not wait to get started. If corporations do not adapt, they will miss out on talent. If politics cannot evolve, Gen Z will have no reason to stay engaged. If culture does not embrace Zoomers and their views, we will miss out on so much.

And most importantly – ask for help. Get them involved. Hold your own town meetings. Zoomers want to engage, and they have a lot of value to add. The old adage that it's a win-win may never have been more true.

# Methodology

The survey, which was conducted online, carries a 95 percent credibility level of +/-1.6 percentage points for the national sample of 15-25-year-olds and 2.6% for the national sample of adults over the age of 25. Post-stratification weights were calculated for this survey. Weights were calculated based on the 2020 and 2021 Current Population Surveys, Ipsos's KnowledgePanel data for 18-25-year-olds and the Centers For Disease Control's data on the mental health of high school students. Gender, age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, educational attainment, current educational enrollment, marital status, and census division were used for weighting. Separate weights were calculated for the sample of 15-25-year-olds and for the sample of adults over the age of 25. Additionally, non-coverage bias factors associated with online behaviors were used to adjust the sample, including tablet ownership, trust in neighbors, and participation in civic activities and social media usage. Among the 15-25-year-olds sample, respondents had a mean weight of 1.82, a median weight of 1.19, and a standard deviation of 2.92. For the sample of adults over the age of 25, respondents had a mean weight of 1.17, a median weight of 2.25, and a standard deviation of 3.15.

# Credits:

## About Murmuration

Murmuration's mission is to transform the politics of K-12 public education. We believe that electoral, organizing and advocacy work is key to creating a sustainable and growing base of voters and other stakeholders, especially in marginalized communities, and elected officials who are committed to fighting for an equitable and high quality public education system. By providing data, tools, research, and strategic guidance to our partner community, we believe that we can create a sector that is best positioned to make long term, systemic changes to public schools possible. Creating an equitable and high-quality public education system will pave the way for generations of children to reach their fullest potential.

To learn more, visit [www.murmuration.org](http://www.murmuration.org).

## About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses, work together to lead the Foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving K-12 education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta.

To learn more, visit [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](http://waltonfamilyfoundation.org) and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

## About John Della Volpe

John Della Volpe is the director of polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, where he has led the institute's polling initiatives on understanding American youth since 2000. The Washington Post referred to him as one of the world's leading authorities on global sentiment, opinion, and influence, especially among youth and in the age of digital and social media. Della Volpe is a MSNBC contributor and he regularly on Morning Joe. His research and insights are often found in national media outlets in the United States and abroad. He is also the founder and CEO of [SocialSphere](http://SocialSphere.com), a public opinion research firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

To learn more, visit [www.johndellavolpe.com](http://www.johndellavolpe.com) or on Twitter @dellavolpe



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