

Understanding the Gen Z Vote

Post-Election Research Project

murmuration

Conducted in Partnership with

WALTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

For the past year, Murmuration, in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) and SocialSphere's John Della Volpe, director of the Harvard Youth Poll and author of *Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America*, has been researching Gen Z (ages 15-25) to better understand their attitudes and perspectives on a range of key issues to determine how to best engage them in politics (www.murmuration.org/GenZ).

From the start, this research was designed to provide issue advocates, community leaders, and people and organizations in positions of power – CEOs, political and government officials, academic champions, and other leaders – with guidance and insight on how best to engage this large, diverse, and increasingly influential cohort.

- Our first round of research on Gen Z began in May 2022 with two qualitative components – three large, town hall-style focus groups in Houston, Atlanta, and Columbus and two small groups with Zoomers (members of Gen Z) living in Arkansas – as well as an extensive national survey with N= 3,805 Americans between 15 and 25, and N= 1,108 people over age 25 for comparison.
- In the second round of our research in late August, we checked in with high school-aged Zoomers to better understand how they were feeling about the new academic year and an election season where many of their priority issues were on the ballot by conducting a national survey of N=1,563 Gen Z high school students.
- Recognizing that politics will play a big role in shaping the direction of the country, we designed our final round of 2022 research to center around Gen Z in the days and weeks immediately following the 2022 midterm elections. This post-election Gen Z research project included exit polls with N=606 voters including N=151 18-29 year-olds across the country, six focus groups with 18-40 year-old registered voters, four of which were conducted with those who voted in the midterms and two with non-voters, a national survey with N=3,227 15-25 year-olds and N=1,036 adults 26 and older, and a series of conversations with high school and college students in markets across the country.

In the pages that follow, we will detail the key takeaways from our 2022 research, the results of our most recent post-election project, what we believe the findings mean, and the actions we believe can be taken to better engage, and involve, Gen Z in shaping the future and helping us to create a more equitable society.

WHY WE CONDUCTED THIS RESEARCH

Gen Z is unlike any previous generation. They are children of a hyper-connected world, with access to unimaginable volumes of information. They came of age during a global health crisis, and against the backdrop of climate change. They lived through the longest war in US history, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the 2008 financial crisis, the opioid epidemic, political turmoil and violence, and mass shootings. Unsurprisingly, over a year-long research project with Gen Z, we continually found that they were experiencing extraordinarily high levels of anxiety and depression.

And yet, the volume of trauma they have endured has not broken their spirit. They continue to defy expectations by remaining engaged, including in civic and community life. Like many others, we share the belief that Gen Z has the potential to change the American political landscape for the better. We therefore designed our final round of 2022 research to center around Gen Z in the days and weeks immediately following the 2022 midterm elections. The quantitative and qualitative findings provided insights into Gen Z's perspective on American politics, their patterns of civic engagement, and enabled us to learn more about which issues are closest to their hearts.

We conducted this research for two reasons:

We saw an urgent need to better understand Zoomers given the impact they stand to have on the future of America. Gen Z is now 70 million strong, and is considered to be the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in American history. 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 on every aspect of society.

We saw an opportunity to elevate Zoomers' voices. Gen Z has 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. Murmuration and the Walton Family Foundation see tremendous potential to engage Zoomers, help them realize their own power, and encourage them to get involved in reshaping society to improve equity and opportunity for every child.

In the pages that follow, we review results from our post-election research. We hope these insights, considered alongside findings from our [May](#) and [August 2022](#) Gen Z projects, will empower stakeholders to better engage, and involve, Gen Z in shaping the future and helping us to create a more equitable world.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

As compared to older generations, more Zoomers say they voted because of timely issues that will shape our society for years to come.

In the context of the 2022 midterms, this meant taking a stance on issues such as systemic racism and reproductive rights. While Zoomers, millennials, Gen Xers and baby boomers generally agreed that it was important to safeguard the rights of vulnerable populations, Zoomers were particularly moved to vote by these concerns.

- 78% of Zoomers thought that it was important to address systemic racism, as compared to only 60% of baby boomers.
- Gen Z was the only generational cohort to rank abortion and reproductive rights (29%) as the political issue they were most concerned about when casting their ballot in the 2022 midterm, followed by the economy and inflation (12% combined).
- Compared to only 18% of millennials, 13% of Gen Xers and 8% of baby boomers who ranked abortion and reproductive rights as the political issue they were most concerned about when voting.

A female college student said,

“ I tried not to vote based on party but on what they’re trying to accomplish [on issues], because I’m trying to have a better worldview and not have such a narrow view on everything.”

On other issues impacting vulnerable populations – like climate change and student debt forgiveness – Gen Z demonstrated greater urgency than older generations. Zoomers placed greater value on issues like combating climate change (73% of Zoomers, compared to 56% of baby boomers) and are more likely to think it is important to address student loan debt (72% said it was important) as compared to older generations (34% of baby boomers said it was important).

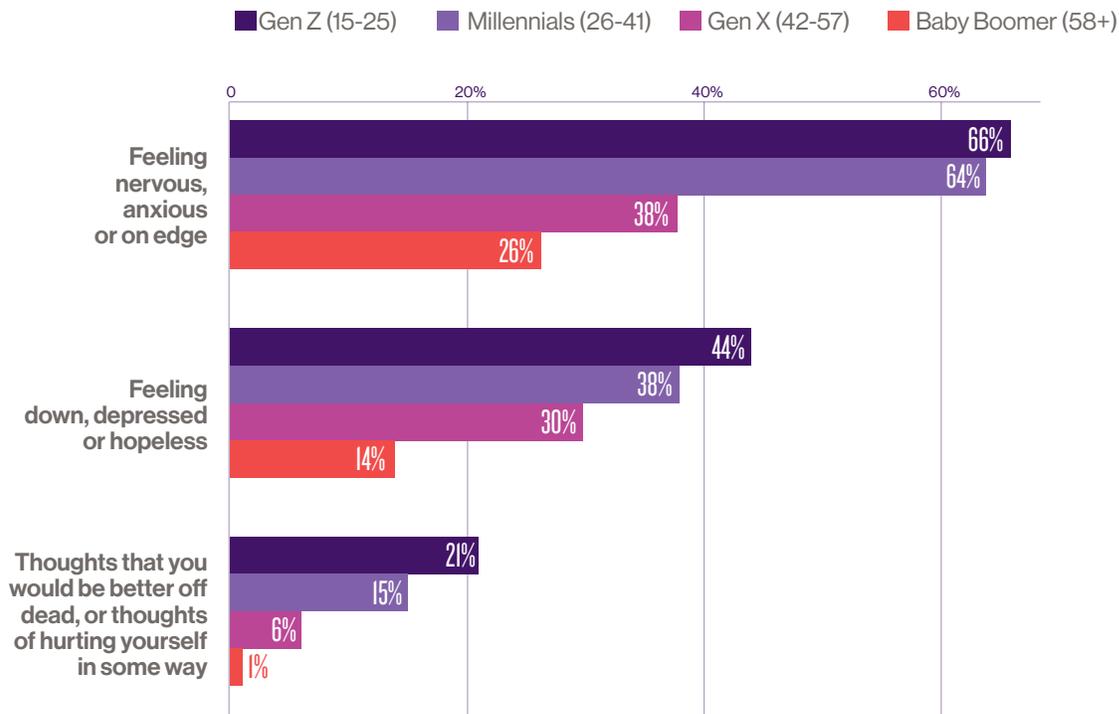
Understanding Gen Z’s orientation towards specific issues is important for political advocates, government officials, CEOs and other leaders. In order to engage this generation, a concerted effort and focus must be placed on addressing the issues that matter most to them.

Zoomers report high levels of anxiety and depression. But instead of shutting down, they mobilize and continue to show up to vote.

While every generation faces its share of challenges, the urgency and seriousness of what Zoomers are dealing with is largely unprecedented. Across each of our 2022 research efforts into Gen Z, we consistently found evidence of Zoomers experiencing exceptionally high levels of anxiety and depression.

- In our December 2022 post-election survey, 44% of Zoomers said that they felt down, depressed, or hopeless at least several days over the last two weeks, which is extraordinarily high compared to older generations (30% for Gen X, 14% for baby boomers).

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



N=3,227 (Online; 15-25-year-olds); N=1,036 (Online; Adults 26+)

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

- In our December 2022 post-election survey, 66% of Zoomers said that they felt nervous, anxious, or on edge at least several days over the last two weeks. This again was remarkably high compared to older generations (38% for Gen X, 26% for baby boomers).

When asked about mental health, two college students in Oklahoma said this:



“A person can only take so much before it starts to affect them. School shootings really affected me. The high school across the street from me had a shooting threat and we had to go on lockdown. I had a full-on panic attack because I thought I was gonna die. There’s a lot of stuff that I’ve seen in the world, and even locally that’s really affected my mental health.”

“There’s the whole war in Ukraine right now, and we’re all just chilling here, like nothing’s going on. The day that *Roe v Wade* was overturned my entire class walked in and we were like, yeah, that just happened. I think everyone feels it on some level.”

And yet, Zoomers still showed up to vote. As we await precinct returns to tell us exactly which voters showed up where, early indications suggest that – at the very least – Gen Z voters are sustaining a trend of increased political engagement through their voting, despite immense mental health struggles.

A first time Gen Z voter who cast her ballot in Michigan said:



“In Michigan, abortion rights were under review. And I’m kind of proud that I did [vote], and I’m proud that other people around me did, because we were able to put that [abortion access] into Michigan’s constitution. And we got Governor Whitmer back.”

And a college student in Georgia said:



“I do think a lot of change starts on the local level when we’re looking at some of the issues that we’re all talking about. Abortion rights depend state by state. So if you’re voting on a local level, you are voting for the people who will make those decisions for you at the end of the day. With gun safety, Georgia has an open carry law for all of the public college campuses. But that’s not like a nationwide thing. That’s a statewide thing. It could change if you vote different people in.”

Media narratives often criticize Gen Z as being naïve, or overly sensitive, and lazy. Meanwhile, their levels of civic participation and engagement suggest just the opposite. Despite high levels of anxiety and depression – which are often associated with withdrawal and inaction – Zoomers are showing up to vote. Early counts of their midterm voting rates suggest that, at the very least, they’re maintaining a level of voting consistent with the highest rates observed across America’s political history. This might be a testament to their emotional resilience. More research is urgently needed to better understand what drives Gen Z engagement, and how Zoomers sustain their engagement while experiencing high levels of anxiety and depression.

When asked what gives you hope for the future, one Gen Z voter in Georgia said,



“ Seeing so many people our age doing the work and feeling passionately about these issues. So much of the work we do is like unpaid or underpaid, but we do it because we care about the issues.”

Zoomers wish they had more information about candidates and issues before the 2022 midterm election.

While over the past few election cycles Gen Z has defied historic youth turnout expectations, many still face barriers to voting because they do not feel equipped with the information they need to complete their ballots. Among Gen Z voters, 33% said they wish they had more information about the candidates and issues prior to casting their ballot. By comparison, only 21% of millennial voters, 11% of Gen X voters, and 6% of baby boomer voters indicated that they wish they had more information.

- Among Gen Z voters who wish they had more information, 28% wanted to know more about the candidates' positions, and 26% wanted to have more information on candidates themselves.
- Gen Z voters who wish they'd had more information primarily got their information from the Internet (36%), then social media (12%), and email (10%).
- Of the Gen Z non-voters surveyed, 50% said that a lack of information about candidates and issues was a barrier to voting.

Similarly, Gen Z was less likely than others to have voted confidently in every race on the ballot in November. Of Gen Z voters, only 50% felt confident in their choice for every race (compared to 61% of millennials, 74% of Gen X, and 77% of baby boomers/silent).

- Gen Z voters and non-voters were more likely to say that a lack of information about candidates and issues was a barrier to voting (43%) compared to 38% of millennials, 25% of Gen X, and 16% of baby boomers.
- Gen Z voters and non-voters were also more likely to say that a lack of information about the voting process (e.g., date, location, and deadlines) was a barrier to voting (33%) as compared to 28% of millennials, 11% of Gen X, and 7% of baby boomers.
- Among the limited Gen Z voters who voted but did not complete their ballot in our sample, 67% cited that the main reason they did so was because they did not have enough information to do so.

To ensure full participation, Gen Z's understanding of the importance of local, downballot elections must increase, and there must be a greater sense of urgency that Zoomers feel around critical issues. Without that, even if voter turnout among Gen Z continues to rise, we may not see that reflected in local politics and civic engagement.

College students in college in Miami Dade County lamented the lack of information and expressed appreciation for efficient information transmission, like infographics.



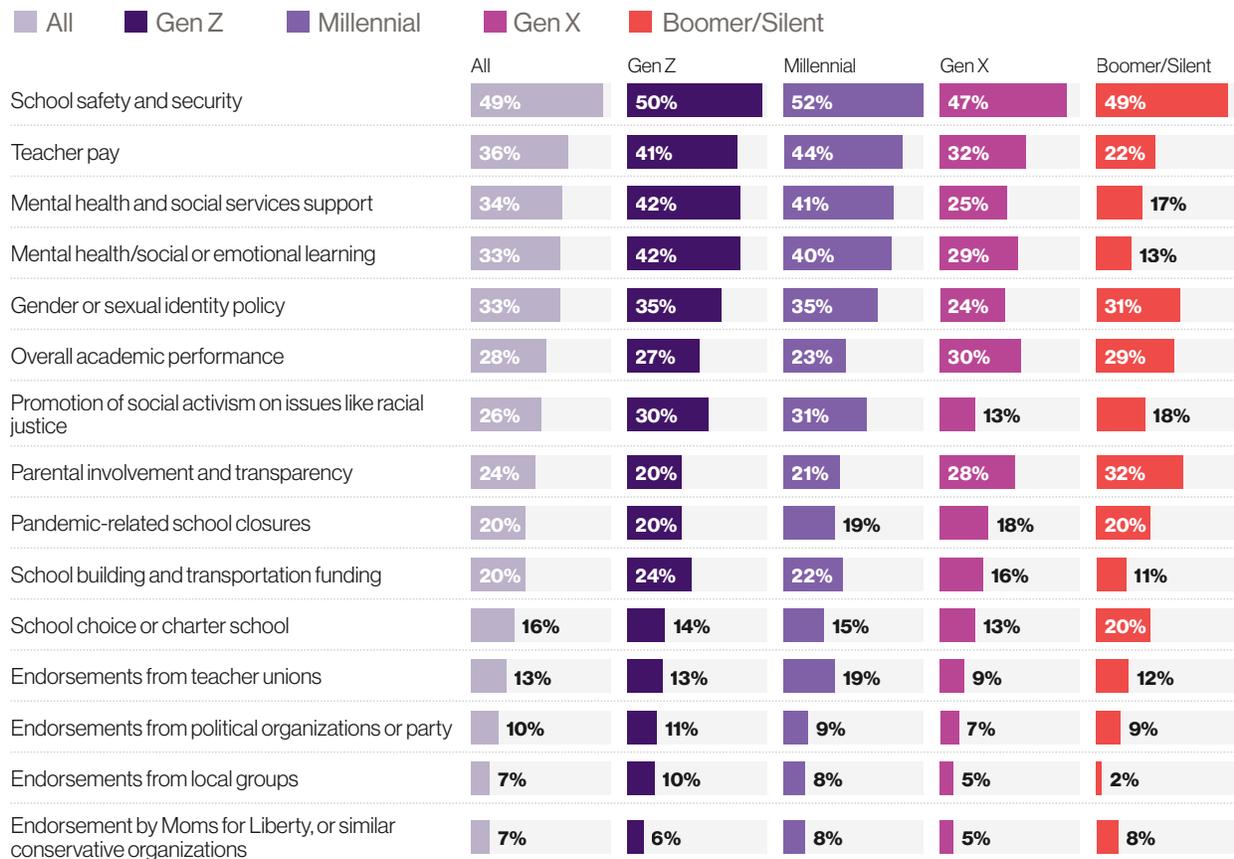
“They had like voter guides come out towards when the actual election and you can see what each person stood for or what they were actually trying to put into policy. And from that, it was simple. It was straight to the point. It was literally: “do they stand for this?” Check. Or they don't. And that actually made it easier to see.”

When asked to describe what worked, they mentioned both infographics shared through social media accounts, or easy-to-read, short booklets. Said one student: “The designs. It was a small booklet, so if someone was to hand that to me, I'll actually like open it, look through it. It looks good. It seems good. It was easier to read than any other thing.”

Gen Z and millennials share little common ground with older voters on which issues are important in K-12 education today.

When asked which of a list of education-related issues or positions influenced their vote in the election, we found strong divides between younger and older voters. While about half of all voters (including 50% of Gen Z) reported that school safety and security were top of mind – beyond this issue, the generational divides were stark. Younger voters from Gen Z and millennial generations were far more likely to indicate that mental health support and teacher pay were prominent issues for them, while baby boomers rated parental involvement and transparency and gender or sexual policy as the next most important after school safety.

Which of the following public school or education-related issues or positions, if any, influenced your vote in the recent election? Please select all that apply.



n=2,006 (asked to midterm voters)

Source: SocialSphere, Inc.

In the May 2022 Gen Z survey, we found that 37% of Gen Z rated the performance of their K-12 schools as either excellent (13%) or good (24%) in preparing them to be an active and engaged citizen; 34% offered negative ratings (18% only fair and 16% poor) – while 29% were neutral. The results from this wave of research show that opinions are largely unchanged. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of Gen Z rate their education experience as either excellent or good in this regard, and 34% only fair or poor.

- Young people in college (42%) and with a degree (45%) are more likely to rate their schools favorably than those without a college experience (33%);
- Zoomers who voted (44%) were 12 points more likely to report that their K-12 schools prepared them to be an active citizen compared to those who did not vote (32%).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPLYING THIS RESEARCH

After a year of conducting this research, we believe even more strongly that Gen Z is an especially important audience to better engage civically. Here are four key recommendations for parties hoping to engage this influential cohort.

Give Zoomers the information they want, in a way they understand it.

Among Gen Z voters | in 3 wish they had more information prior to casting their votes.

Among Gen Z non-voters | in 2 said that a lack of information about issues and candidates was a barrier to voting.

Gen-Z voters and non-voters have one thing in common: they both want more information about candidates and issues. There is an opportunity for campaigns and advocates to engage Gen Z even more impactfully simply by providing them with information on their candidates, issues, and platforms. Gen Z focus group participants expressed favorability to information that can be easily consumed, such as infographics, and can be easily shared on social media platforms such as TikTok. In focus groups, many Gen Z participants reflected favorably on infographics that contrasted the platforms of both candidates using symbols like check marks to indicate which policies and positions a candidate held as compared to their opponent. And in our surveys, we found Gen Z respondents usually get their information from the internet (including news sites, but also Reddit and YouTube) or from social media (such as Instagram and TikTok). In short, meet Zoomers where they're at – on the internet and on social media – and hand them easily digestible information about candidates and issues.

GEN Z: POST-ELECTION

2 To win support, show your work.

Political pundits emphasize the importance of messenger and messages in mobilizing voters. Yet insights from our focus groups suggest that conventional approaches – such as securing endorsements from celebrities and public figures—may not be as effective with Zoomers. In our focus groups, questions about celebrity messengers were met with frustration, rather than as something to bolster their support. Such efforts seem to ring hollow amongst Zoomers.

As two Georgia college students put it,



“The celebrity thing specifically feels so fake in some ways. It feels so unserious. It feels like they’re trying to find this shortcut to connecting, especially with young voters, when the actual work of it, what matters, is having conversations.”

“I saw that Selena Gomez posted something for Stacy Abrams. I was like, that’s cool, but how much did you pay for that? Could you just do mutual aid and actually work in the community and show people that you’re willing to do something now to help them?”

Actions speak louder than words. Being involved in your community matters. Establishing your good record of community improvement matters. And conversations and local engagement matter. Groups looking to engage Gen Z should consider emphasizing successful actions and political victories – particularly those that improve material conditions for vulnerable people or groups whose rights are threatened. Moreover, groups should consider their messengers, and where possible, create dialogue around wins amongst Zoomers, rather than leveraging endorsements.

3 Experiment with information distribution.

Zoomers feel underequipped to make important decisions – like whom to vote for and what the office actually does. These can both be barriers to voting or ballot completion. Campaigns should therefore spend greater time experimenting with information dissemination. But importantly, the manner in which the information is shared likely matters too. Information shared via the Internet and social media, as our survey suggested, seems more likely to reach Zoomers. But as our focus groups indicated, it may also be worth experimenting with small social networks (like college campuses) and leveraging existing social ties within these communities.

As one student put it,

“Instead of flying in some B-list celebrity, you actually just put three canvassers on each campus to have conversations with young people.”

Campaigns could try sampling different recommendations from our participants. For instance, imagine stacking each of these recommendations by having dedicated campus ambassadors to share infographics within their community. This approach would satisfy many of the requests Gen Z voters made when asked what might bolster their engagement. In short, there is a massive opportunity for experimentation here; we have a real shot at testing out how best to reach Gen Z voters thanks to the thoughtful and generous insights they shared through our research.

4 Make education an issue requiring urgent attention.

More work is needed to ensure that young people (and young voters in particular) not only keep public education at the top of their political priority list, but vocalize and demand the need for changes. In addition to addressing the lack of understanding among young voters about the critical role that school boards play, we must ensure that Zoomers understand the role school boards play in addressing many of the issues (mental health, school-based violence, etc.) they care most deeply about and find ways to promote candidates that are aligned with their values.

When you consider where Gen-Z and young millennials are on issues related to education, and their increasing engagement in politics over the past few cycles, it's clear that they can play a big role in a future coalition that supports education. In other words, there is an opportunity to turn a lot of Gen-Z and young millennials into education advocates and champions. That will take time and effort. A coordinated, sustained, well funded effort will be required. That work should begin now.

WHAT'S NEXT

We will continue to keep a close watch on Gen Z as they reveal more about what they expect from older generations, institutions, and others, and the changes they want to see (and in some cases drive) across our nation and society. The more we listen, the better we will understand what they value and how they will devote their energy and resources in the years ahead.

As a generation, they have and continue to experience unprecedented rates of anxiety and depression. Yet, by all indications, Zoomers are showing up for their communities as indicated by their high levels of voter turnout compared with historical youth turnout. As we continue researching and elevating Gen Z's voices, we hope to understand not only how they sustain political engagement, but also their attitudes around key issues, and how to best engage them in future cycles.

The more we include Gen Z in planning and discussion about how politics, education, technology, work, and community can improve, and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population, the greater the likelihood we will realize the visions of what is possible. This generation is an important audience for the future because of their size and their potential to shape a positive future in this country. The consequential decisions that will lead to that change are starting to be made and through their engagement Zoomers are beginning to exert their influence.

Murmuration and the Walton Family Foundation see tremendous potential to engage Zoomers, getting them involved and working together to reshape our society in the years ahead.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Following the 2022 midterms, Murmuration and the Walton Family Foundation launched an extensive research project to learn more about how Gen Z experiences politics today, what motivates them to engage civically, and whether they feel optimistic and prepared for success in the future. The purpose of this post-election research was to identify the issues Gen Z believes are most pressing in our society right now, and gain perspective on how to encourage and enable more young people to engage politically and civically in the years ahead. We also used this research to gauge whether Zoomers' feelings on key issues, their experiences with mental health, and more had changed over the course of the year since our research project began.

The following elements were included in this post-election research project:

- Exit polls from precincts in Philadelphia, PA; Cleveland, OH; Houston, TX; Raleigh, NC; and Tampa, FL.
- Focus groups with Latine voters, Latine non-voters, millennial mom voters, first time voters, rural voters, and Black non-voters.
- A national survey fielded between December 4, 2022 and December 9, 2022 (n=3,227 Gen Z and N=1,036 general population for comparison, credibility level +/- 1.7% for Gen Z Sample at the 95% Level +/- 3.0% for the Adults 26+ Sample at the 95% Level) looking at Gen Z attitudes on politics, mental health, education, future of work, and a range of other issues.
- Conversations with high school and college students in markets across the country (Seattle, WA; New Haven, CT; Boston, MA; Fort Collins, CO; Dover, DE; Atlanta, GA; Miami, FL; Norman, OK) to help elevate Gen Z voices on various issues.

ADDITIONAL GEN Z INSIGHTS

You can find the details from our initial spring and fall research at murmuration.org/genz.

- [Looking Forward to Gen Z.](#)
- [Back To School Check-In.](#)
- As a fellow with the Walton Family Foundation, Rachel Janfaza, a journalist covering young Americans and politics, traveled with Murmuration to conduct supplementary listening sessions across the country. Her essay details some of what she heard from high school and college students along the way. [**"If we don't do it, then who will: A Dispatch from the Road."**](#)

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.

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 and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

About John Della Volpe

John is one of the world's leading authorities on millennials and Gen Z, including what values drive their decision-making and how they view the American dream. John has advised heads of state, Fortune 100 CEOs, military generals, athletes, and entertainers—most recently, serving as pollster and strategic communications advisor to President Biden and his 2020 campaign. John has also directed the most comprehensive survey of youth attitudes related to politics and public affairs for Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics for two decades. Inspired by that ongoing study, John recently published his first critically acclaimed book, *Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Passion and Fear to Save America*. In 2008, John received an Eisenhower Fellowship for which he traveled extensively throughout Asia (including a supervised day in North Korea) studying millennials. In 2011, John was honored to serve on the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission on Media. In 2013, he was named a "Future Legend of Marketing" by the Ad Club of Boston, and in 2018, he received the Arthur E. Hughes Award for Career Achievement from the University of San Diego. He is an MSNBC contributor and also the founder and CEO of SocialSphere, a public opinion research firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

To learn more, visit www.johndellavolpe.com or on Twitter @dellavolpe