Cultivating Care

How & Why Young People Participate in Civic Life

Springtide
RESEARCH INSTITUTE®

Our Data Collection

This report explores young people's civic care using two data sources collected between December 18, 2023, and March 6, 2024:

1. Springtide surveyed a sample of 6,669 young people in the United States between the ages of 13 and 25. Survey recruitment was guided by quotas to match census demographics for age, gender, and region.

2. Our research team conducted in-depth interviews, each lasting about an hour, with 76 young people ages 13 to 25 from across the United States. While the survey enabled us to collect data on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors from a representative sample of young people, the interviews allowed us to explore in-depth what's behind those attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

More details on sampling, surveys, interviews, and other aspects of our methodology can be found in the "Research Methodology" section.

Contents

Foreword

Anger. Apathy. All too often, we pigeonhole young Americans into stereotypes of civic participation: wholly disinterested or passionate in ways that feel disruptive or threatening to established systems.

But there's another word for how young people approach social issues and political life: a profound sense of *care*.

When we asked thousands of young people ages 13 to 25 to tell us about politics, we ended up hearing about care. More than conflict, avoidance, and uncertainty, we heard love for neighbor. Concern for one another. Attention to basic needs and human rights. A desire to connect and respect across difference. In short, asking young people how they "do politics" led us to a better understanding of *how to care*.

Care in the context of young people's civic lives extends beyond mere emotion or concern. It means seeking and gaining knowledge, detangling complex identities from narrow labels, safeguarding self and other, and promoting dialogue and action around urgent issues. Young people care *about,* care *for,* care *to,* care *with,* and care *because.*

Springtide's research reveals young people to be neither disengaged nor fanatical but deeply invested in relationships, communities, and the ideals of democracy. Young people tell us how they seek knowledge not just for its own sake but as a tool for informed action. How TikTok can feel more authentic than partisanship. How peers and adults offer emotional backing and clarify allegiances. How trust mediates when, how, and with whom to invest in shared social goods.

Young people are figuring things out—both alone and together with others—because they care.

The stakes are high. The same institutions that young people approach with skepticism—government, organized religion, media, corporations—are among the very foundations of civic life. Will young people's modes of engagement be welcomed as care or dismissed as anger and indifference?

Cultivating care means cocreating pathways for young people to feel heard, respected, and validated. It means reimagining education, connecting passion to action, promoting intergenerational dialogue, and adopting a long-term view. It's an invitation to recognize, amplify, and leverage the care that emerging generations already show.

The strength and resilience of shared communities depend upon it.

Key Findings on Young People & Civic Care

1

Young people's civic identities do not align neatly with traditional political categories. More than half of young people do not identify with either one of the two major political parties. Most prefer flexibility and issue-based engagement over strict partisan affiliation. Many feel jaded by political parties and politicians, seeing politics as performative and divisive.

2

Young people report low levels of trust in political institutions. More than one-third of young people express distrust toward the US presidency. More than one quarter distrust Congress, the Supreme Court, and the election system.

3

Perceptions of partisanship and incivility prevent many young people from calling themselves political. Many young people do not consider politics an important part of their lives. Young people who identify as political tend to feel knowledgeable about social issues, hold an organized set of beliefs that helps them make sense of these issues, engage in behaviors that support their beliefs, and see politics as relevant to their everyday lives.

4

Despite distancing from politics, very few young people report *not* caring about any political issues. Young Americans speak passionately about issues like education, the economy, abortion, and climate change. They explain how relationships, communities, personal experiences, and the media motivate and shape how they care for specific issues.

5

Parents, teachers, and other trusted adults play a crucial role in cultivating young people's civic care. Trusted intergenerational relationships are key to teaching young people to think critically, discuss difficult topics with integrity, and bridge connections to civic institutions. Negative experiences, such as feeling unheard or encountering closed-minded attitudes, can discourage civic participation.

6

Young people look both in and out of institutions to express their civic care publicly. Forms of engagement include civic learning, volunteering, online activism, civil discourse, and voting. Young people activate care within their own networks and communities while moving within complex social and political landscapes that feel farther outside their control.

7

Few young people say that religion should have "a lot" of influence on politics in the US. More commonly, young people prefer that religion have "some" or "no" influence. Young evangelicals are the most likely to say that religion should have "a lot" of influence; non-religious young people are the least likely to agree. Young people are more than twice as likely to count religion among the most important things in their lives than they are politics.

8

Religious and spiritual beliefs shape young people's civic care. Young people are much more likely to report that their religion or spirituality shapes their politics than vice versa. Religion helps to motivate and interpret, clarifying for young people what to care about and how. Many reflect critically on how beliefs intersect with political stances that might undermine freedoms.

Introduction

Who *cares?* Patterns of civic care develop long before a person can vote. Whether through volunteering, protesting, or seeing and sharing information on social media, young people form habits now that will affect American civic life for decades to come. Understanding the health and future of democracy requires understanding *civic care* among young people today.

This report does just that, focusing on the complex dynamics that shape young people's civic care. It explores how emerging generations approach civic learning, the influence of moral and religious beliefs, perceptions of politicians and political systems, the relevance of political labels and social identities, relationships with peers and adults, and more.

In the section "Understanding Young People's Civic Care," we explore how Americans ages 13 to 25 identify with and participate in civic care. **Our findings reveal that young people's civic identities, beliefs, and behaviors cannot fit neatly into preexisting notions of partisanship.** Many young people hesitate to identify with a political party at all. The range of their positions often extends beyond affiliation or ideology.

We also find that young people sometimes engage civically but other times choose to opt out. Disillusioned, but far from apathetic, young people exercise their civic care by drawing sharp boundaries around certain issues and ways to talk about them. Young people also offer suggestions for how to treat one another respectfully and participate civilly in social and moral life. Living with widespread division, young people and the adults who care about them need such ideas to develop trust.

What is "civic care"?

We define *civic care* broadly, to capture the range of motivations, activities, and behaviors by which young people participate in the political and communal life of society. This takes account of common forms of civic engagement, such as voting or volunteering time and resources to support a local community or cause. It also includes whether and how young people feel a sense of control over their civic lives, sometimes called civic agency. Young people may experience civic care as empowerment or confidence within shared social structures and communities, seeing themselves as authentic, willing participants.

"A Closer Look: Religion & Civic Care" shares how civic care arises at the intersection of religion and politics. This special focus continues Springtide's attention to young people's religious and spiritual lives, updating statistics shared in prior *State of Religion & Young People* reports. **We find that many young people view civic care for themselves and others through a lens of religion and spirituality—but are far more critical of beliefs that undermine religious freedom or the right to disagree.**

"Equipping Young People for Civic Care" examines how trusted adults can help young people develop civic care. Parents, teachers, and other nonfamily adults, as well as peers, play starring roles in civic learning and socialization. Young people get much of their information about how to think critically and participate in civic life from the trusted adults in their lives. Trusted adults can teach young people how to discuss (and disagree on) difficult topics with integrity. And young people have much to teach trusted adults about listening well, caring deeply, and respecting others with different identities, beliefs, and experiences. Intergenerational relationships bridge young people to the large-scale institutions they often doubt.

We hope this report helps practitioners, parents, teachers, scholars, and older adults invest in understanding and cultivating care among emerging generations. Care, we learn from young people, lies at the heart of enabling and sustaining our shared democratic society.

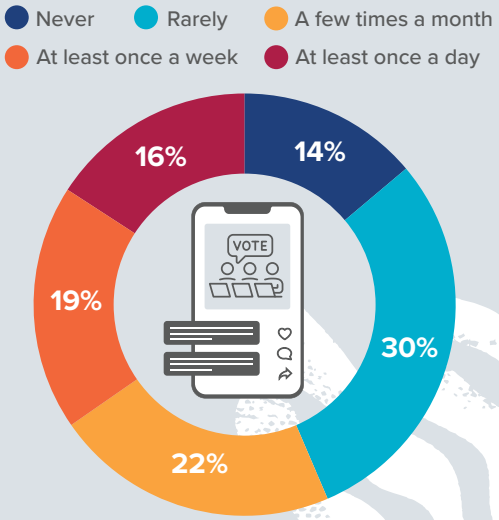
Who are "trusted adults"?

We use the term *trusted adults* throughout this report to refer to adults that young people turn to for support and guidance. Trusted adults may include family members, teachers, coaches, mentors, faith leaders, and more. Research on trusted adults, including Springtide's, shows the powerful impact they can make in the lives of young people. Springtide has found that the presence of just one trusted adult in the life of a young person significantly decreases a young person's sense of loneliness and stress.

Most young people (97%) report using social media at least 1–2 hours per day, most often to gain knowledge (47%). While only about one-third of young people on social media (35%) say that they use these platforms as a source for news, most encounter political issues there anyway. Fifty-seven percent report viewing political information on social media at least a few times a month.

"How often do you view information related to politics on social media?"

Percentage of young people responding to the question



Note: *Young people who reported using social media zero hours per day are not included in this graph.*
Source: 2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Civic Life, *conducted between December 18, 2023, and March 5, 2024*

- **Political events themselves—policy changes, elections, or widely covered news stories—can also bring social issues onto young people's caring radar.** Ximena, Lisa, and Nora are among those who say they began to care about the issue of abortion when they heard about the 2022 US Supreme Court overturning of Roe v. Wade. Other respondents recall how the election of Donald Trump led them to start caring about issues like immigration (Lisa), racism (Marisol), foreign policy (Caden), and local politics (J.J.). The Israel-Hamas conflict produced moral outrage in young people like Camila and Michelle, who scrolled social media posts about the conflict as it unfolded.

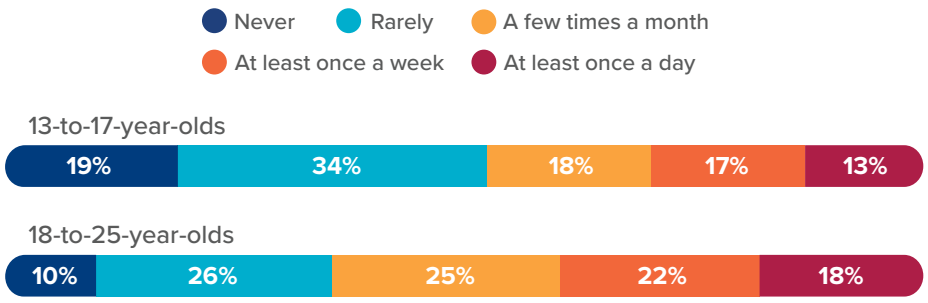
- **News and social media coverage of events draws awareness to social issues, making those issues seem worthy of attention and care.** Jaden says that social media helps him gain "awareness about different things, things that I should care about, [and] ways that I can be involved." Ethan, 25, shares that most of the things he sees about political events are online:

> I can get online right now and see something about either somebody that's the president, [or] a governor or mayor did this or did that. And if I didn't have social media, maybe I might not know they committed a crime or they did something underhanded. But now I do; I have access to everything people are saying and doing.

As compared to those ages 13 to 17, young people ages 18 to 25 are more likely to encounter political content on social media, and they report seeing it more often than those ages 13 to 17.

"How often do you view information related to politics on social media?"

Percentage of young people by age responding to the question



Source: 2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Civic Life, *conducted between December 18, 2023, and March 5, 2024*

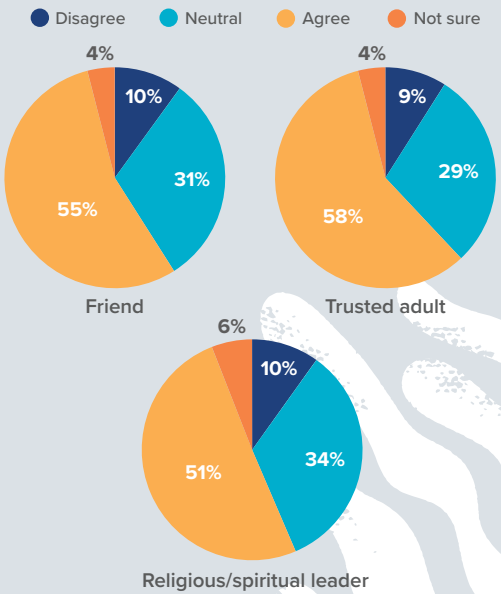
Encountered via social media, a barrage of social issues compete for airtime, all claiming equal importance and urgency. Numerous and opposing claims can leave young people feeling overwhelmed and confused about *what* to care about, what side is "right" or "fake," and how to evaluate competing claims. Ajani puts it this way: "Everything is 'breaking news.' Everything is monumental. Everybody constantly has to be talking about everything 24/7. And if you just ignore people, it dies down. It just seems fake." When asked if she believes that social media has impacted her political views, Krishna says: "It's so overwhelming sometimes, hearing so many different opinions. It can be a lot."

Talking Politics

Young people tend to talk about politics with those who *share* their political views. Those who report more frequent conversations with trusted adults about politics also report higher levels of agreement with the trusted adults they engage in conversation. The same is true for political conversations with friends and religious leaders—the more agreement, the more frequent the conversation.

"Thinking of the _____ you discuss politics with most often, to what extent do you agree on political views?"

Percentage of young people responding to the question



Note: *The graph combines "strongly disagree" with "disagree" and "strongly agree" with "agree." Respondents were also able to indicate that they were "not sure."*

Source: 2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Civic Life, *conducted between December 18, 2023, and March 5, 2024*

When asked about what civil conversations look like—including those marked by political *disagreement*—young people tell us that those conversations demonstrate humility, charity, openness, and respect.

Ethan shares that he enjoys conversations about politics "when we'll actually come to an agreement and maybe even learn something from each other's perspective. Like, 'Okay, I see why you were saying that.' And, 'Okay, I see where I could be wrong, or maybe I could pay a little bit of attention to things like that.' Just opening each other's mind a little bit more, rather than just trying to get our point across."

Armani, 18, tells a story about how she and her friend disagree about issues:

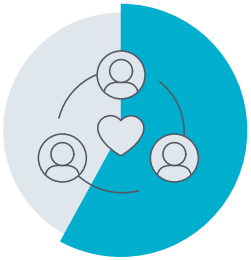
> I'm okay with you having different views as me, as long as we're allowed to listen and engage in civil discourse, and be open to changing your mind, because I'm open to changing my mind. I change my mind quite often.

Like Ethan and Armani, many young people express a desire to learn from and find things in common with friends and family who hold opposing political opinions and identities. Very few young people express that they will not maintain relationships with people who have different political views. James says that it isn't necessary for the people in his life to agree with his political views. He shares: "I don't care about that at all. I think what's more important is your ability to respect the other person and to understand them and how they think."

Lisa says:

> It would be great if people can find common ground. But I think sometimes it's okay if people have differing opinions. . . . I find myself saying, "Let's just agree to disagree." Because, again, we live in America; everyone is entitled to their own opinions. So, if yours is different from mine, I'm not gonna attack you for it. I just hope you're educated about it. But I'm just gonna agree to disagree with you. And that's okay.

The majority of young people we surveyed (58%) agree that it is possible to have a close relationship with someone who does not agree with them on political issues. Fewer than one in five young people (17%) would stop speaking to someone who strongly opposed their political views.



58% of young people **agree that it is possible to have a close relationship with someone with whom they disagree politically**.

52% of young people **disagree that they would stop speaking to someone who strongly opposed their political views**.

Source: 2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Civic Life, *conducted between December 18, 2023, and March 5, 2024*

DATA DROP

Want to know more? Check out our Data Drop: "The majority of young people won't end a friendship over politics."