

Beyond Turnout: What Gen Z's Social Media Reactions Reveal about the 2025 Elections in the New Jersey's Gubernatorial and NYC's Mayoral Elections



Introduction

The recent 2025 New Jersey Gubernatorial and NYC mayoral races captured national attention as this race could potentially project the mood for the upcoming 2026 midterm election to flip the conservative leaning during the 2024 Presidential election. Particularly, Democrats lost a significant number of votes from the younger demographic groups such as Gen Z, a 10-point decline compared to the 2020 Presidential election (Hartig et al., 2025). Gen Z constitutes about one-fifth of the American voting population (CIRCLE, 2025) and voted at record-high rates in the last two presidential elections. Engaging and mobilizing Gen Z seems pivotal for election candidates. State elections such as gubernatorial races have become more impactful for youth and university students (Romano & Kahn, 2025). However, in New Jersey, Kamala Harris only gained 10-point of votes from young voters in 2024 compared to 16-point gained by Biden in 2020 (Stanton, 2025). Such decline made these two elections even more critical to shape the political landscape since the last presidential election and to test the Democratic party's ability to re-engage and mobilize younger voters who have swung right after 2020.

Characterized by their competency in digital technologies, preferences for authentic, transparent communication, and their enthusiasm for fighting social justice, young voters (e.g., Gen Z) have become one of the most politically engaged groups (Suhardi, 2025). This shifting electorate landscape challenges political candidates to adopt communication strategies fostering interactivity, digital engagement, and authenticity. Young voters under 30, especially women, delivered a historic turnout for NJ and NYC elections on November 4 with 69% of youth voted for Sherrill and 75% of youth supported Mamdani (CIRCLE, 2025). Strikingly, 82% and 80% young women voted for Mamdani and Sherrill respectively; 83% of black youth and 85% of Latino youth supported Mamdani (CIRCLE, 2025). In contrast to the narrowed youth support for Harris during the 2024 presidential election, turnout among young voters surged 9% in New Jersey's 2025 governor race (Denean, 2025). Data from the exit polls clearly revealed a significant increase in youth voter turnout. However, what remains underexplored is how Gen Z

interpreted these elections and what campaign messages resonated most strongly on digital platforms. Given Gen Z's political volatility between the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, their online reactions to the recent 2025 gubernatorial and mayoral elections, specifically in New Jersey and the New York city, provide a critical lens to examine whether such active political engagement illustrates a significant attitude shift prompted by specific political messaging. Understanding Gen Z's reactions on social media toward these two pivotal political races is thus conducive to identifying the drivers behind the surge of youth political participation on November 4th. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What emotional sentiments characterized Gen Z's social media reactions to the November 4th New Jersey gubernatorial and New York City mayoral elections?

RQ2: What dominant issues emerged in Gen Z's social media discussions of the November 4th New Jersey gubernatorial and New York City mayoral elections?

Method

This study explored Gen Z's social media reactions toward two crucial elections held on November 4, 2025 in the East Coast: New Jersey gubernatorial and New York City mayoral elections. Particularly, this study focused on a period of two weeks (i.e., November 4 to November 18) post the elections. *Brandwatch*, a premier social listening tool, was utilized to collect and analyze social conversations. This study specifically targeted the population of Gen-Z. *Brandwatch* allowed us to search through the world's largest pool of online conversations contributed by distinct social and/or demographic attributes (e.g., gender, location, interests, political affiliations, etc.).

We included key words related to the major candidates in each race (e.g., #NJgovernorrace, @mikiesherrill, @Jack4NJ, NYC Mayoral race 2025, @zohrankmamdani, etc.) to build tailored search queries on *Brandwatch* to collect data. X tends to be the most active platform related to political and civic discussion (Gearhart et al., 2024). Not surprisingly, *Brandwatch* focused on X to extract social chats from Gen Zs related to these two consequential political races.

It is important to note that data collected by *Brandwatch* may not exclusively represent the Gen Z population. The dataset included in this study thus may not be exclusive on Gen Z social media users. This restriction may stem from the daunting challenge of accurately verifying social media users' demographic information (e.g., age, gender, etc.), compounded by the open-access nature of conversations on social media.

Overall, the total volume of social discussions on X during this study's observation period among Gen Z regarding NJ governor race surged 106%. Strikingly, the overall volume of social chats among Gen Z surrounding NYC mayoral race spiked 122%, reaching 56,000 posts on X. The significant increase in the volume of social discussions signaled enthusiasm among Gen Z about the crucial victories of these two pivotal races.

Gen Z's Discussions about the NYC Mayoral Election on X (Nov. 4 – Nov. 18, 2025)

All 60 days 30 days 14 days 7 days Today 4 Nov – 18 Nov ▼

Total Mentions ⓘ

56k / ↗ 122%
Previous period: 25K

Unique Authors ⓘ

20k / ↗ 154%
Previous period: 7760

Gen Z's Discussions about the NJ Gubernatorial Election on X (Nov. 4 – Nov. 18, 2025)

All 60 days 30 days 14 days 7 days Today 4 Nov – 18 Nov ▼

Total Mentions ⓘ

3309 / ↗ 106%
Previous period: 1605

Unique Authors ⓘ

1892 / ↗ 384%
Previous period: 391

Findings

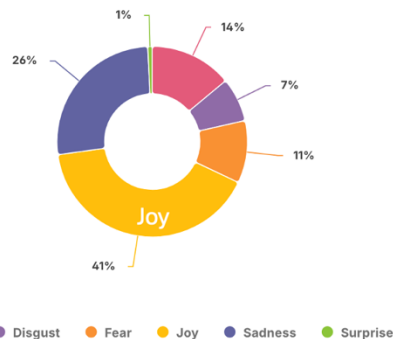
RQ1: What emotional sentiments characterized Gen Z's social media reactions to the November 4th New Jersey gubernatorial and New York City mayoral elections?

Strong Positive Sentiment

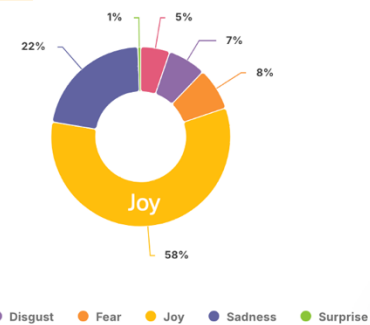
Joy emerged as the dominant emotion among Gen Z over the democratic victories for NYC mayoral and NJ governor elections. This positive emotion surged 110% and 300% for Mamdani and Sherrill respectively in the two weeks post the elections. Young voters expressed a palpable sense of optimism for transformative changes promised in Mamdani's campaign. Such optimism is manifested through young voters' acknowledgement of Mamdani's commitment to tackle some pressing issues such as housing affordability, social justice, and public transportation, which resonated deeply with local residents. A viral post with 560K views reads: "Thanks, Zohran. I'm proud to be in the fight with you for a democracy on the terms of working people: affordability, housing, safety, and more. From NYC to Seattle: this is your city. #thisisyourcity" Another popular post states: "#Hope#USA via #NYC a new dawn & era #DemocratsDeliver via #DemocraticSocialistsOfAmerica fiscal responsibility & wealth distribution starting w/#affordability #Capitalism forced marriage with #socialism instead of capitalist running things to their way/financial benefits." The excitement embedded in such posts implies a broader

support among Gen Z or young voters toward progressive policies. Social chats reflect enthusiasm about Mamdani’s leadership that promises a more inclusive and equitable city.

Sentiment about NYC Mayoral Race



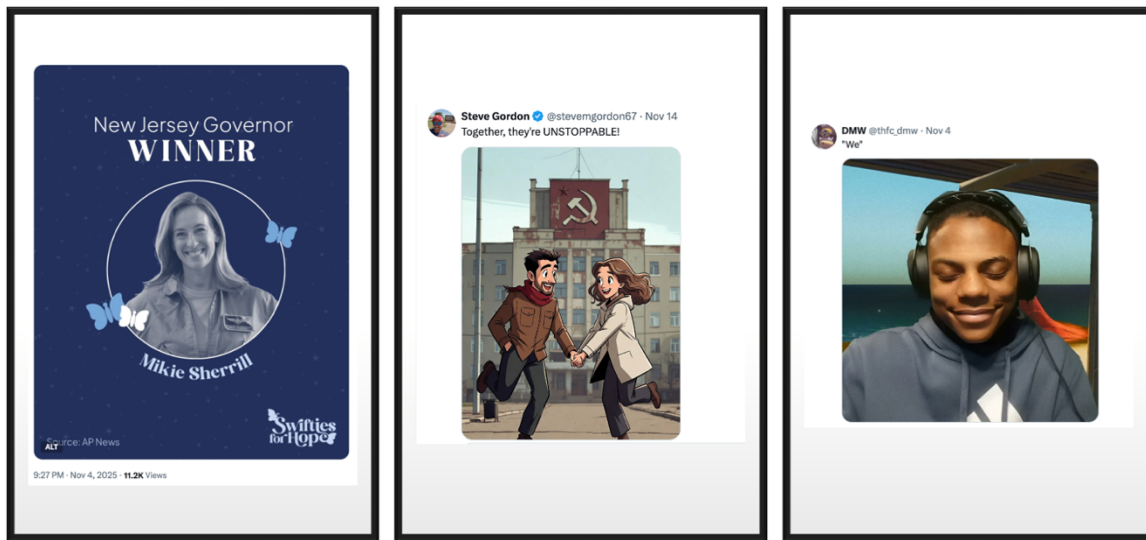
Sentiment about NJ Governor Race



Impressively, young voters in New Jersey expressed resounding joy over Mikie Sherrill’s victory, an astounding 300% increase during the two weeks after the election. Viewing Sherrill as a transformative leader in the notoriously corrupt New Jersey political arena, many young voters seemed hopeful that her leadership would materialize significant improvements in the state. A popular post with over 11k viewership cheers the new governor-elect: “Flying a dream, wins by the pocketful! 🚀💙📧 Congrats, @MikieSherrill, on becoming New Jersey’s next governor!” Many Gen Zs reposted Pete Buttigieg’s congratulatory post –“New Jersey and Virginia have chosen well by electing @MikieSherrill and @SpanbergerForVA as their next governors! They are proven leaders who won by focusing on what matters most - how politics and policy can make everyday life better and more affordable.” Particularly, many young democrats seemed to deem Sherrill’s landslide win as a clear sign of a surging blue wave in the upcoming 2026 midterm elections, as many posts raving that “WOKE IS BACK.”

RQ2: What dominant issues emerged in Gen Z’s social media discussions of the November 4th New Jersey gubernatorial and New York City mayoral elections?

Celebrating the Historical Wins



Smashing victories by Sherrill and Mamdani signified historical wins for both candidates' races. Strikingly, Mikie Sherrill became the first Democratic woman to take over the governorship in New Jersey, a landmark step for women in politics. More than just a personal achievement, many young voters hailed NJ's election outcome along with key democratic victories in other states, such as Virginia, as part of a rising trend of Democratic successes across the country. Such victory also seemed to reflect a sentiment of rejecting Trump-backed politics in the State, as exemplified by a viral post with over 270k views:

"BREAKING: Mikie Sherrill wins the New Jersey governor's race! What a devastating night for Donald Trump. These races aren't even close."

Another viral post cheered on:

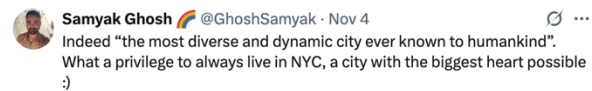
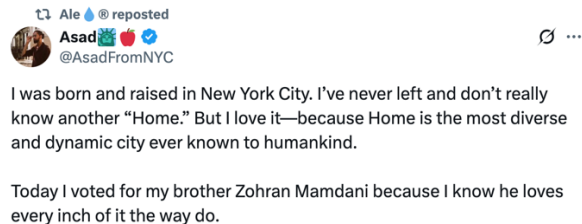
"With @MikieSherrill and @SpanbergerForVA's wins tonight, we will soon have a historic class of TEN women @DemGovs."

Congratulatory posts on Sherrill's win flooded on social media and seemed to affirm that her campaign resonated with voters by listening to their concerns and addressing their needs. Gen Zs showed hope and excitement on how the future NJ governor will tackle some pressing issues (e.g., housing, healthcare, reproductive rights, education, etc.) that New Jerseyans deeply care about. A popular re-shared post with over 30k views among young voters reads:

"Congratulations to @MikieSherrill on being elected the next governor of New Jersey. I've had the pleasure of seeing Mikie up close, and let me tell you, she is fired up to deliver on the kitchen-table issues that help families get ahead. She will work with anyone to get stuff done and always put the people of New Jersey first."

Zohran Mamdani made history as the youngest, first Muslim and South Asian mayor of New York City in more than a century. Gen Z cheered Mamdani's victory as a significant political upset challenging the elite political machine. Given Mamdani's campaign starting at just 1% in the polls to claiming a landslide victory, young voters hailed the symbolic meaning of

Mamdani's win as a beacon of hope to shatter entrenched political structures, marking a new era characterized by a strong desire for political representation among the working-class, struggling citizens. Many young voters touted Mamdani's victory as "a contagion" of the progressive *movement*, "a glimmer of hope of real change," and "a new era for the Democratic party." Especially, many Gen Zs expressed the importance of accepting diverse political leaders and challenging persisting social stereotypes, as such sentiment is illustrated in the following posts:

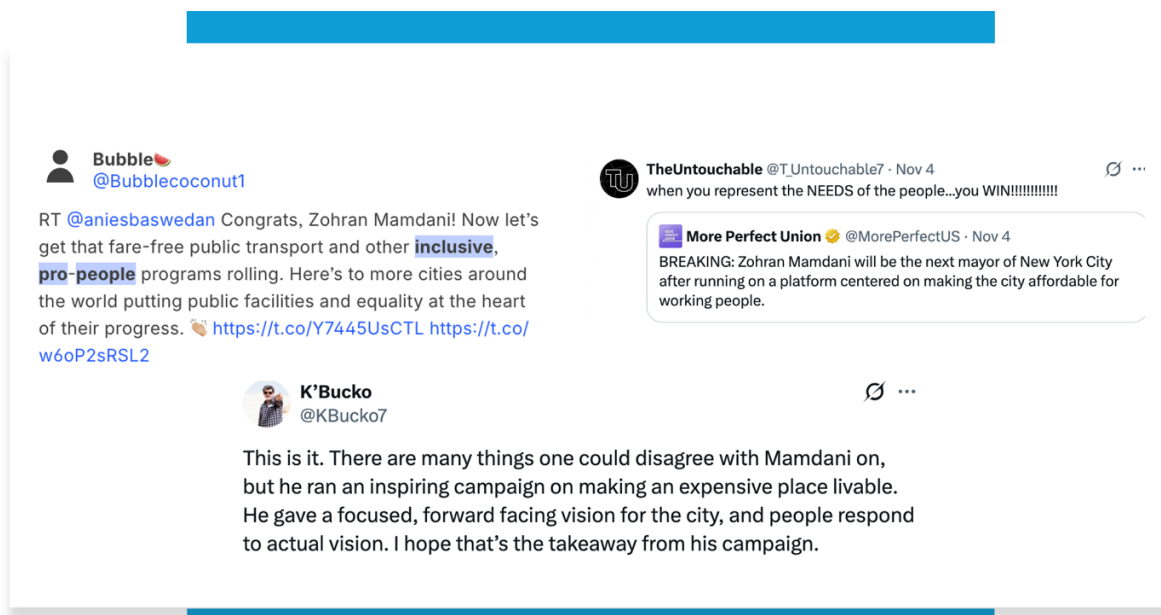


Young voters exuded enthusiasm about Mamdani bringing fresh perspectives to City Hall and addressing the concerns of a diverse population, as typified in the following viral post: "New York City elects Zohran Mamdani as their Mayor. American Dream is Alive! 🇺🇸..." Many young voters expressed faith in Mamdani's ability and commitment to unite diverse voices and bring innovative solutions to the city's urban challenges, as demonstrated in this viral post: "Thanks, Zohran. I'm proud to be in the fight with you for a democracy on the terms of working people." Mamdani's campaign message on prioritizing the needs of ordinary, working people seemed to have resonated well among voters who feel ignored by conventional and elite politicians. Social media users displayed strong excitement of having elected a leader who truly represents the interests of the *majority*.

Affordability Crisis

Both candidates have vigorously addressed the issue of affordability in their campaigns. Sherrill proposed concrete policies to bring down the cost of living regarding housing, healthcare, and food. Similarly, Mamdani tackled the affordability crisis for New Yorkers in terms of housing, childcare, healthcare, public transportation, and groceries. An underlying theme across these two campaigns lies in their focus to ensure affordability of essential services for all especially those marginalized groups such as the working class amidst surging inflation. Young voters' interest on affordability remained high for both candidates in the two weeks post elections. Particularly, the volume of social chats related to issues of affordability increased 74% among social conversations about Mamdani. For Sherrill, the number of social discussions focusing on affordability surged 65%.

Viewing systemic inequalities and social injustice as root causes of the affordability crisis, Mamdani's vision involved a comprehensive approach to prioritize the basic needs (e.g., childcare, transportation, healthcare, housing, groceries, etc.) of the working class, low-income residents, and marginalized communities. Despite facing criticisms, these campaign messages resonated strongly with Gen Zs on social media (see examples below).



Young voters praised Mamdani’s initiatives of “building affordable apartments,” “raising minimum wage to \$30 dollars an hour,” “access to affordable food,” and “a rent freeze in subsidized housing” as necessary to mitigate the financial pressure faced by ordinary New Yorkers. Many Gen Zs viewed Mamdani’s agenda to foster affordable living in the city as a significant shift to progressive policies in order to build a more inclusive, equitable environment where all residents can thrive.

Compared to explicit social discussions about Mamdani’s agenda on affordability, young voters opted to mostly reshare posts related to Sherrill’s vision on affordability from official accounts, such as @NJUA (New Jersey Utilities Association), @AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees), or @AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations). Despite the salience of affordable living as a shared concern, young voters seemed more enthusiastic to actively vocalize their views on the implications of Mamdani’s proposed policies than to generate original comments about Sherrill’s affordability agenda. This contrast indicates a distinct difference in young voters’ cognitive engagement in these two political elections. Apparently, Mamdani’s explicit, policy-laden framing of the affordability crisis appears to have created a stronger appeal among Gen Z, hence driving more original posts or commentary than passive message amplification.

Shift in Policies and Leadership

The landslide election victories in New Jersey and New York marked voters’ shifts in expectations on government policies and leadership to address mounting economic challenges. Despite a shared focus on working families, Sherrill and Mamdani demonstrated distinct approaches in policies and leadership to attract their constituents. For governor-elect Sherrill in New Jersey, she adopted moderate policies to prioritize the pressing concerns of the working class by focusing on kitchen-table issues (e.g., assisting small food retailers, lowering grocery

prices, increasing competition among food retailers, etc.). She often used her own personal stories (e.g., mother of four) to connect with voters on providing for families. Her commitment to fighting for the working class and addressing pressing economic challenges emerged as a major theme in the congratulatory messages. Her campaign emphasis on bringing tangible improvements to residents' daily lives through inclusivity and collaboration reflected a pragmatic leadership. Such leadership rooted in responsiveness to voters' needs created strong appeal to her voters, as demonstrated in the following posts:

@RepSherrill 's last speech on the House Floor, employing her colleagues to not give up the ship. New Jersey is so lucky to have her as our next Governor to protect all of our residents.

"Our candidate really understood the state."...@mikiesherrill's laser-focus on affordability and what voters actually cared about.

Compared to Mikie Sherrill, Mamdani adopted more progressive policies in his campaign to combat the affordability crisis and fight for working-class interests, representing a transformative departure from previous mayoral candidates and appealing to disaffected voters neglected by conventional political structures. Progressive candidates' victories (e.g., Zohran Mamdani, Hannah Shvets, etc.) reveal the electoral power behind younger voters and marginalized communities who rallied behind candidates prioritizing solutions to everyday economic and social challenges. An excited young voter proclaimed: "Lets go America. Elect progressives." Particularly, this progressive approach seemed to have fostered a unity among diverse voter bases, such as young Africans, Hispanics, Muslims, and others. Such enthusiasm surrounding Mamdani's campaign demonstrates an increasing demand among young voters for candidates who can genuinely represent the interests of marginalized groups (e.g., the working class) and inspire a broader progressive movement, as seen from young voter's post:



Contra
@Contr



This is crazy copium but I genuinely hope Zohran's generational campaign run + his future impact on NYC inspires a real progressive movement in the US.

Every democratic candidate plays a "safe" campaign and never represents the working class or stands on progressive policies

Young voters seemed to warmly embrace Mamdani's progressive policies to reshape the city. Specifically, the progressive campaign narratives from candidates such as Mamdani highlighted a surging discontent among younger voters with the current political landscape. These young voters seemed to be strongly attracted to political messages characterized by a commitment to tackle pressing issues such as economic affordability and social justice. This preference exemplifies a pivotal shift in voter priorities, preferring candidates who can advocate for bold reforms instead of incremental changes. Such change could potentially mark a precedent for future political campaigns across the country.

Conclusion

Findings of this study reveal that Gen Z was not disengaged in the 2025 New Jersey gubernatorial and New York City mayoral elections. Rather, they were emotionally charged and highly expressive in their political views. Issues related to social justice (e.g., LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, access to healthcare, etc.) and economic calamities (e.g., affordability crisis, energy cost, etc.) triggered strong emotional resonance among young voters. When Mamdani and Sherrill framed these issues through their structural disparity, moral stakes, and concrete policy changes, Gen Z did not just simply agree. Instead, they actively interpret and engage with these issues by explaining, debating, and relating to their own life experiences.

Notably, this study highlights differences in depth and forms of digital engagement from Gen Z with two political candidates, Mamdani and Sherrill. Particularly, different campaign framings seemed to have significantly shaped how Gen Z publicly affirmed, recognized, and validated these two candidates' credibility as worthy candidates. Mamdani's campaign focused on using moral (e.g., justice, equity, etc.) and collective identity frames (e.g., we, our city, etc.) in explicit policy proposals. Social discussions associated with Sherrill's campaign, interestingly, adopted more institutional language (e.g., unions) and performance cues (e.g., competent, experienced, etc.). Gen Z voters exhibited deeper cognitive or ideological engagement with Mamdani's campaign, such as debating and reasoning what rent freeze means and whether Mamdani represents socialism or democratic reform. Mamdani's moral and policy-driven framing prompted debate, identity expression, and original comments from Gen Z. In contrast, young voters expressed their trust toward Sherrill's messaging through message amplification, a relatively passive mode of engagement. Such different modes of online engagement among Gen Z underscores that progressive messaging, as represented by Mamdani's campaign, tends to activate a deeper level of cognitive engagement among Gen Z voters.

This study expands the existing body of knowledge on political engagement with Gen Z by illustrating how online discourse serves not only as a site for expressing opinions but also a discursive space for shaping political legitimacy and cognitive engagement among young voters. For political campaigns seeking to appeal to Gen Z voters, a priority lies in stimulating a higher level of cognitive engagement through messaging built on moral values, legitimacy, structural solutions, and collective identity. Gen Z responds strongly to political messaging that connects emotional resonance with concrete policies.

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