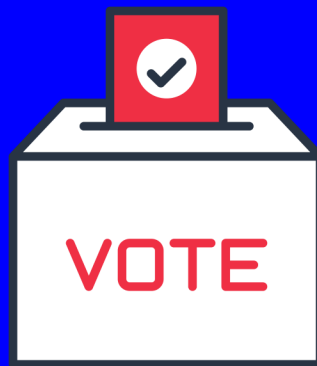


2024

**Negative Emotions on Social
Media Dominate Gen Z's
decisions for the 2024 Election**

**Gen Z Voters
Speak: The Future
of Voting and
Civic Engagement**



School of
Communication
and Media

MONTCLAIR
STATE UNIVERSITY

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Communication**

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Researchers



Dr. Yi Luo

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Luo has conducted research in the areas of organizational change, sensemaking, leadership, social media and communication management, activism, organizational justice, and global public relations. Dr. Luo received her Ph.D in Communication from the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Luo's research has been published or accepted to be published in Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, among many more. Dr. Luo teaches a variety of courses in organizational communication and public relations such as Cases and Campaigns, Communication Theories, Communication Research, Global Public Relations, Public Relations Ethics, New Media Applications in Organizations, and Digital Production.



Dr. Jin-A Choi

Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Choi received her PhD from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Choi's scholarship focuses on target advertising celebrity/social media influencer endorsements, digital advertising, text mining, and data analytics. Her research has been published in journals such as Journal of Global Marketing, Communication Studies, and others. Dr. Choi teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Social Media Analytics, Influencers and Opinion Leaders and Integrated Communications.



Dr. Bond Benton

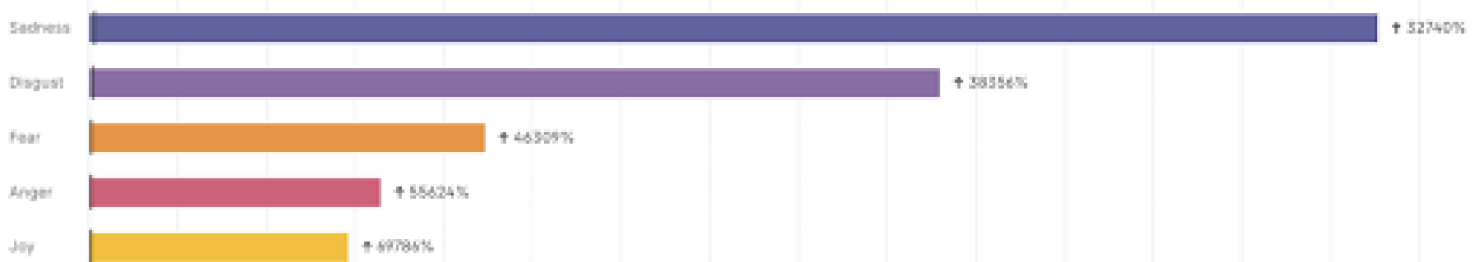
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Dr. Benton's doctorate is from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr. Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr. Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media, Public Relations Tactics, and many more. His first book, The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce, was released in 2014.



Abstract

The demographics of Gen Z have positioned it to potentially have the greatest impact of any emerging generation in the upcoming election. As this generation consumes social media at a rate higher than any other generation, evaluation of the themes and tone surrounding the election in social media is particularly important for understanding Gen Z and politics. Results show election themes and issues in social media reveal negative emotional sentiment (77%) online is more than double the amount of positive sentiment, with “sadness, disgust, fear, anger” far outpacing optimistic sentiment such as “joy.”



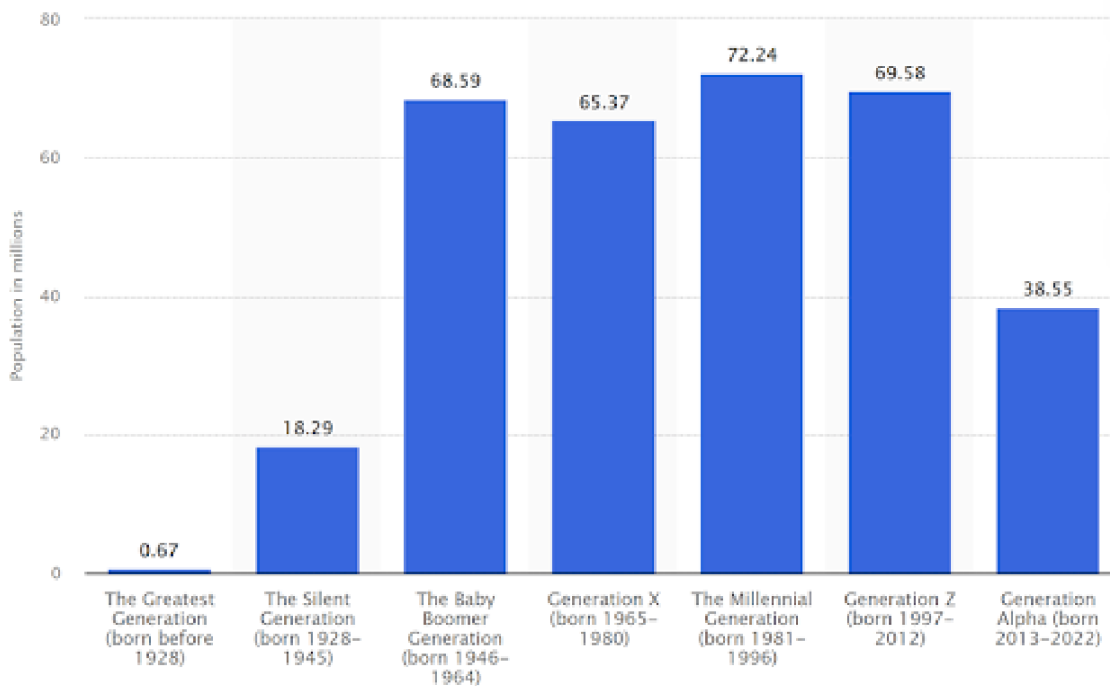
Issues related to human rights appeared to be top of mind to the Gen Z electorate in terms of social media activity.



Introduction

Moving into the 2024 election, Gen Z has eclipsed a significant milestone. It is now larger than the “Baby Boom” generation and nearly matches the size of the Millennial Generation that preceded it (Statista, 2023).

Figure 1: Comparison of Population size between Genz and Other Generations



Source: Statista

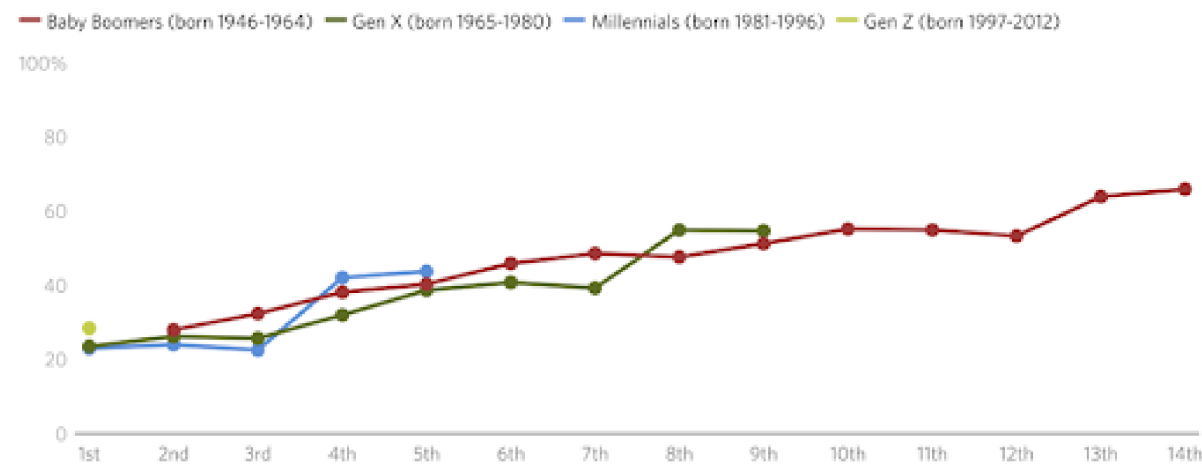
Particularly significant is the role that Gen Z will have in shaping electoral politics in the United States. It is a generation that has experienced hardships related to the COVID-19 pandemic with related economic challenges including inflation and access to affordable housing (Parker, 2020).



Introduction

Deep convictions about a variety of social issues including LGBTQ+ inclusion and reproductive rights (in particular) appear to be top of mind political issues for the demographic (Deckman, 2022). It is also the most diverse and most robustly educated generation in U.S. history creating a context that would appear to invite increased engagement and participation in elections. That analysis was borne out in 2022 with Gen Z voting at a rate higher than any previous generation in their first midterm of eligibility (Medina, 2023).

Figure 2: Comparison of Voting behavior between Gen Z and Previous Generations



Source: Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement



With such a significant role in the upcoming election, it's important to analyze the election context Gen Z will be participating in. As social media usage is nearly ubiquitous among Gen Z (Dixon, 2024), analysis of social media topics, tone, and trends about the election is especially salient when considering Gen Z and politics. Tone plays an essential role in elections, especially presidential campaigns. While negativity is baked into the political process, previous elections have tended to be contested on positive themes, as well. From famous messages like Reagan's "Morning in America," Johnson's "Great Society," Bush's "Thousand Points of Light" (and his son's "Compassionate Conservatism"), and Obama's "Hope and Change," have all energized supporters with themes that invite positive sentiment. While the current campaigns could shift in the coming months, it would appear that a galvanizing message of optimism is not overtly found in current election discourse. As such, it is crucial to consider the context Gen Z will encounter in the upcoming election by examining what the tone and themes of social media content being posted which Gen Z consumes at a far greater pace than any other generation (Dixon, 2024). With that in mind, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What are the general sentiments expressed by social media users regarding the 2024 Presidential Election?

RQ2: What issues do social media users care about for the 2024 Presidential Election?



Method

To examine the above research questions regarding Gen Z social media users' perceptions and sentiment toward the 2024 Presidential election in the U.S., this study utilized artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect and analyze social conversations. To discover unique trends and patterns exhibited by groups with varying social and/or demographic attributes (e.g., gender, location, interests, etc.), Brandwatch can search the world's pool of online conversations for target groups. Therefore, the data collection was specified to a panel of Gen Z social media users. Through Brandwatch, researchers collected data solely from X (formerly known as Twitter), which is consistent with the focus from most research examining online political communication studies (Álvarez-Peralta et al., 2023). The number of studies about political communication on X (i.e., Twitter) is much larger than for any other social media platform.

An astounding 1 million social conversations targeted at Gen-Z social media users were collected from February 1 to April 7, 2024 using key terms such as “2024 voting, 2024 election, 2024 presidential election, etc.” The data were contributed by 58% male and 42% female X users respectively. Strikingly, this period witnessed a staggering 36k% increase of social conversations related to Gen-Z and the 2024 presidential election compared to previous two months.



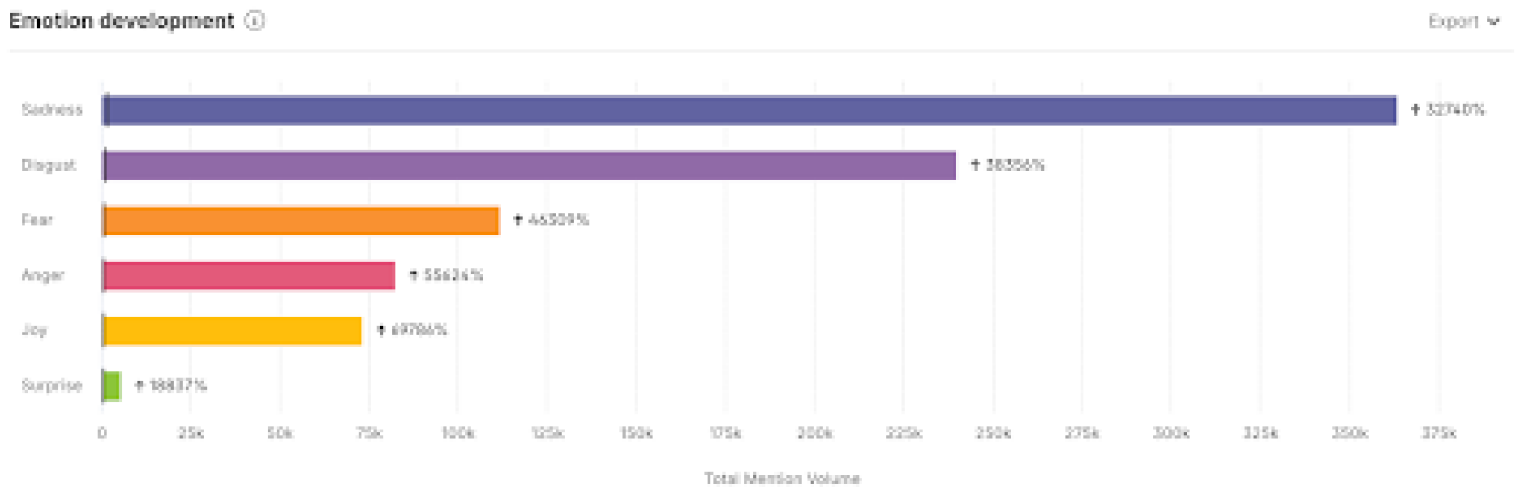
Method

Figure 3: Data Snapshot



Negative emotions dominating social conversations (sadness, disgust, fear, anger)

Figure 4: Emotions related to the 2024 Election among Gen-Z



In the looming 2024 Presidential election, social media users’ emotions seem to be predominantly driven by negative sentiment (77%) such as sadness (41%), disgust (27%), and anger (9%). A striking, promising theme from the predominantly negative social chats lies in the energizing calls by social media users from social media users to ignore the polling results and to instead vote. Starting in late March, social media data showed that the thought of supporting Biden excites voters. Particularly, an emerging theme related to voting underscored the importance of youth engagement.



Sadness. Feelings of helplessness and dejection dominated the negative sentiment from Gen Zs on social media. Sorrow over the Supreme Court's decision on abortion rights, emerging rise of Trump's candidacy, current economic impact (e.g., surging food prices, rising inflation rates, etc.) of the Biden administration, and doubts about President Biden's mental faculty reached a peak point in early February. Social conversations during this period exhibited a tone of despair over Trump's narratives overshadowing political issues as well as both parties' campaign strategies toward the November election.

Notably, a second strong wave of sadness emerged right after Biden's State of the Union speech on March 8. Heartbreaking chats flooded on X over blatant reproductive restrictions to women's rights in light of the International Women's Day. The hope to advocate for women's rights seemed to be dampened by doubts among social media users about Biden's ability to gain popularity through fundraising especially after comparisons with Trump's 2016 campaign. Approaching April, the dejected sentiment centered around the dilemmas revolving the rivalries between Biden and Trump, similarities between Trump and Netanyahu, and Trump's incessant lies.



Disgust. Disgust, accounting for nearly one third of the emotions identified on social conversations, revealed clearly social media users' repugnance over a series of sociopolitical issues, such as the problematic legal rights among the trans community, restricted abortion rights, classified document mismanagement by Presidents Biden and Trump, mental as well as physical wellness for Democratic and Republican's presidential candidates, enforcement of border policies, and border crisis.

Several days before and post Biden's State of the Union Address saw another peak in disgust surging among social media users vocalizing their criticism on abortion rights, Biden's speech, exacerbating political divisions within the country, politicians' (e.g., Tim Tuberville) support of Trump, as well as the significant repercussions of Trump's policies and actions. Interestingly, this particular sentiment seemed to trail far behind sadness as expressed among social media users.



Fear. The issues that trigger fear among social media users exhibited tend to be shifting in this period. In February, the emotion of fear centered around America’s policies and military involvement in Ukraine and Middle East, Trump’s international policies and relationships with global leaders (e.g., Putin), and war crimes in Gaza. From late February to mid-March, unsurprisingly, social media users seemed to feel weary about Trump’s surging rise in Super Tuesday voting, increasing support in key battle states such as Virginia, looming possibility of Trump running in 2024, Supreme Court’s involvement in Trump’s court cases, Trump’s statements about new strategies if elected, and possible international influence (e.g., China, Russia, etc.) on elections.

The sentiment of fear reached another crest on March 21 when social media users voiced their apprehension about human rights abuses in Gaza, problematic judgements by state leaders (e.g., Biden, Netanyahu, Putin, etc.), and the pending damages to democratic processes. Despite the fear, a promising sign was clearly detected in late March advocating the public to vote and protect the country’s democracy. The fear of the chaotic international geopolitical landscape and the threat on human rights seemed to motivate voters’ self-efficacy, turning to their power of votes to shape the political future in the U.S. and the world.



Anger. The outrage exhibited on social media appears to shift with the evolving Israel-Hamas war. In February, mounting anger among social conversations targeted the country’s involvement in the entangled conflict zone in Gaza. Specifically, social media users vented strong fury against the Biden administration’s support and funding violence in Rafah, explicitly calling it “a genocide.”

In March, the war seemingly slowed down as Israel withheld its military activities in Rafah for Ramadan. Outrage with domestic politics took the center stage, in addition to outrage with the Biden administration’s role in humanitarian crises in Gaza. Primarily social media users seemed angry and frustrated about unfairness of media coverage of Trump by ignoring his mental faculty in relation to age (e.g., speech mishaps, getting confused, babbling nonsense in speeches, etc.), Trump’s control of news articles (e.g., removing unfavorable sections before sharing), disappointing voter indifference for the upcoming election, suppression of voting rights (e.g., requiring photo Ids to vote), and political bias on social media related to elections (e.g., silencing conservative voices, misinformation, etc.).



Focus on Human Rights Issues

A prominent theme out of the mass social conversations regarding the upcoming election appears to focus on human rights issues, such as voting rights, women's reproductive rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, transgender rights, and rights for the displaced people in Gaza. As the ongoing conflict in Gaza and Russia's oppression of LGBTQ community (e.g., labeling international LGBTQ movement as extremist), the country's foreign policies have been placed under scrutiny due to mounting concerns over human rights issues (e.g., abuses by armed groups, arbitrary detention, children's rights, LGBTQ rights, etc.).

Particularly, social conversations championing women's rights jumped 74% in the observation period. February 1 to April 7 witnessed a staggering 93% increase of social chats about human humanitarian aid, food assistance, opening aid corridors, and women as well as girls' rights in Gaza. In terms of advocating the rights for the transgender community, threads of social chats underscored the importance of acknowledging trans rights as basic human rights in order to uplift individuals.

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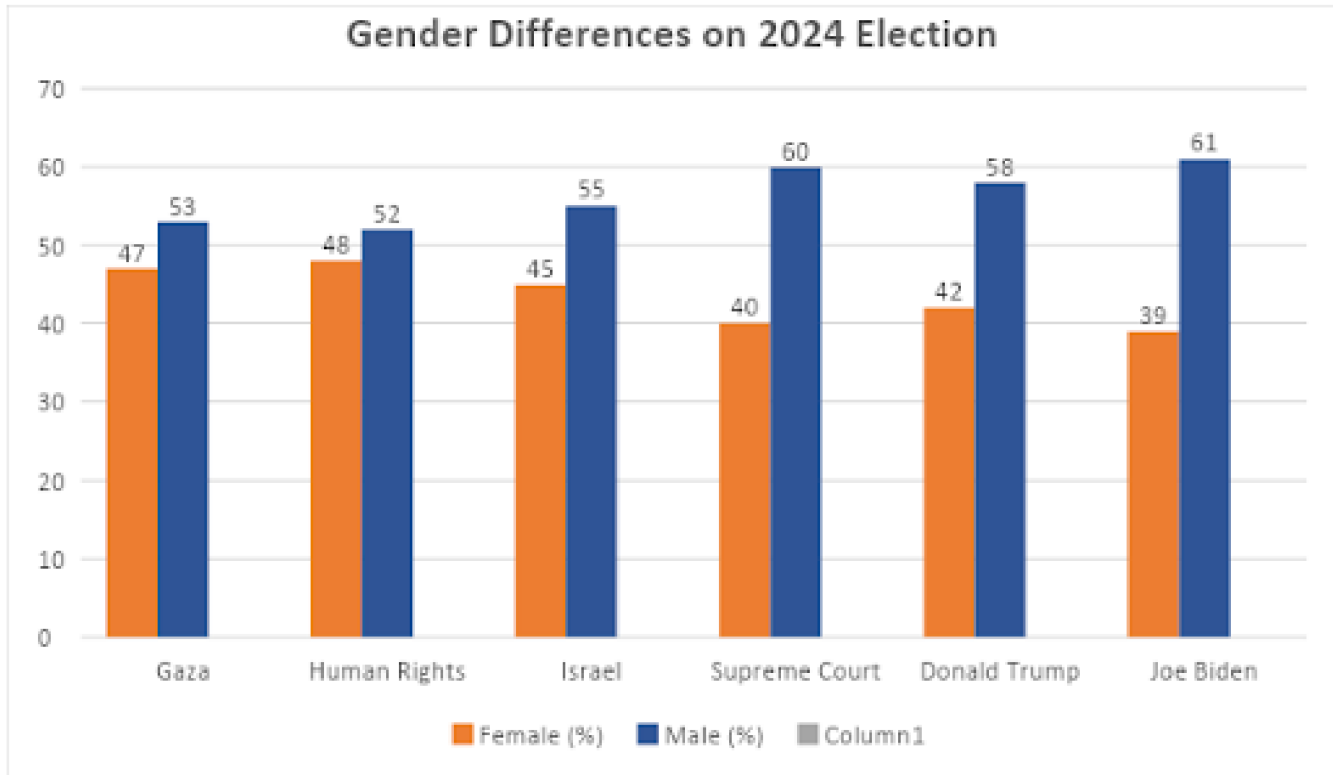
Social discussions on voting rights called for the imperative need to improve access to voting for individuals with disabilities. Clear, loud condemnation was expressed about how voter requirement laws (e.g., requirement of photo ID, etc.) disproportionately discriminate against black and Latino voters, a blatant violation of the Voting Rights Act.

Conversations surrounding these right issues (approximately 46%) dominated over other election-related issues, such as economy (e.g., inflation, jobs, housing prices, etc.), environment, healthcare, crime, etc. Such predominant concerns by social media users on human rights suggest that the presidential candidates' actions and decisions regarding these salient human rights issues may be impactful in securing voter support for the November's election.



Gender Differences on Election Related Issues

Figure 5: Comparison of Mentioning Election-Related Issues among Gender



Demographic comparisons among election-related issues are made through *Brandwatch* by identifying key phrases appearing in social mentions associated with either female or male contributors. Based on such comparisons, issues related to human rights, Gaza, and Israel seemed to have captured the attention from both male and female social media users. At this point, issues related to Gaza, human rights, and Israel hold universal appeal across genders, signaling the salient issues cared by the social media users in the 2024 election.



The number of mentions about the Supreme Court from female social media users (40%) trails significantly behind that by their male counterparts (60%). Such a gap may imply that male social media users, compared to their female counterparts, are more likely to pay attention to and importantly discuss the role of the Supreme Court in relation to the 2024 election on social media. The gender gap between female and male social media users who mentioned the 2024 presidential candidates is larger for Biden compared to Trump, which may suggest an opportunity for Biden to communicate to female voters to improve voter engagement.



While the study intended to target specifically the population of Gen-Z, the data collected by Brandwatch were not exclusive to the Gen-Z population (eg., inclusion of other generations due to sharing behavior). Given the daunting challenge of verifying social media participants' demographic information (e.g., age, gender, etc.) from a data set of one million social media data and the open-access nature of online conversations, this data set did not emerge as a surprise. Nonetheless, our data set was built on social conversations more likely to be contributed from the Gen-Z population.



Conclusion

With nearly eight months ahead of the 2024 Presidential race in the U.S., nearly one million social conversations in the last two months, examined in this study, clearly attests to surging public interest in the upcoming election. Despite serious concerns about both candidates' age and mental faculties as indicated in our data, strikingly social media narratives seemingly suggest an issue-centric mindset among young voters. Issues pertaining to human rights such as abortion rights, trans community rights, gender equality, and voting rights have emerged as persistent focal points for the presidential candidates. Concerns for these contentious issues of human rights are likely to pose as a dominant force to swing young Americans' voting decision in November, 2024. Such issue-salient mentality towards the presidential election may spell further sociopolitical polarization in the country. Undoubtedly, Arizona Supreme Court's recent ruling (Billeaud & Lee, 2024) on reinstating an 1864 abortion ban in the state has exacerbated the divide between pro and anti-abortion rights groups. Voters across the country will be eager to hear how Biden and Trump address these human rights issues and U.S. international foreign policies in the upcoming presidential debates, likely signaling opportunities or liabilities for either candidate.

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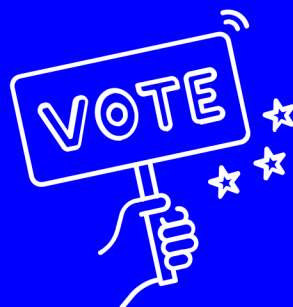
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The overwhelmingly negative sentiments (77%) such as sadness, anger, and fear dominate the election-related conversations from social media users decrying the perceived human rights injustices, limited capacity of aging candidates, politically tinged polling results, rematch between Biden and Trump, conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, domestic woes (e.g., soaring inflation, immigration, housing market, etc.), and others. As traditional polls do not adequately count for emotions (Meehan, 2022), our findings shed light on a perspective based on an emotional understanding of human behavior (Kahneman, 2011), namely the voting behaviors for the 2024 presidential race. Studies (Webster & Albertson, 2024) have shown that emotional reactions to political events (e.g., Supreme Court's abortion ruling) significantly shape public opinion. These election-mobilizing emotions appear to energize young Americans stronger than the polling results to cast their votes since only votes serve as the ultimate judgment, as indicated in our data. Prominent narratives on social media from our data focus on encouraging each other to vote fueled by sadness and fear over the state of democracy. It is still too early and uncertain how such negative emotions can actually drive young Americans' electoral behavior. Data from our study suggests that emotions can be a promising factor to drive voter engagement among young Americans for the 2024 presidential election.



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Thank You!

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