



What matters to Arizona young voters?

Arizona Youth Identity Project

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Voting has increased among young adults, yet many express discontent with both political parties. The majority of “Generation Z” believe that drastic political changes are needed in the U.S. (CIRCLE 2019). Capturing young voters’ perceptions of political participation is crucial, given that they believe that existing political structures have inadequately addressed their concerns (Harris et al., 2010; Kiesa et al 2022). Arizona provides a unique opportunity to examine young voters’ engagement due to its status as a political “battleground” state that was key in Biden’s successful bid for the Presidency, a hotbed for election denial, and growing Independent voter block that makes up over one-third of registered voters. Young adults are concerned about social equity, healthcare and climate change, and many were driven to vote for Biden to remove Trump from office in 2020 (Eustice et al 2021). Young voters in Arizona look forward to voting in the midterm elections, although they are increasingly disappointed with both political parties.

The [Arizona Youth Identity Project \(AZYIP\)](#) examines how U.S.-born Latinx, Native American, and White young adults ages 18 to 29 in Arizona engage politically, blending insights from survey data collected in September and October 2020, three waves of in-depth interviews conducted in October 2020, November 2020 and June 2021, and a photovoice project conducted in November 2020. We asked participants about the political issues that matter to them most, what motivated them to vote in the 2020 elections, and why they voted for Biden or Trump.

Findings

Our findings show that young adults have serious concerns about whether local and federal government leaders have their best interests in mind. Many did not feel optimistic about politics in general but believed that voting was the most significant way an individual could make a difference in local and national issues. In the months leading up to the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, the young adults in our study expressed an

urgent need for systemic change and bold action to address important social issues. At the same time, comparisons by political affiliation and voting intentions reveal stark differences connected to the polarization of political messaging across parties (Stromer-Galley et al. 2021, Dobber et al. 2021).

One of the most important findings in our study is the ambivalence young adults showed towards the two major parties. In the pre-election survey, more than one-third of young adults thought of themselves as Independents. Additionally, when asked in interviews “how would you describe your political beliefs?” participants tended to focus on political ideology rather than partisan affiliation, with most offering nuanced outlooks, saying they were “in the middle,” or “moderate,” or called themselves Independents, saying they would see “both sides” or didn’t feel they quite “fit in” but felt they had to choose a party to vote in. In the months leading up to the election, self-identified Independents were also less certain about which candidate they would vote for compared to Democrats or Republicans. While 54.6% of Independents planned to vote for Biden, 36.4% were undecided on who to vote for. In contrast, 93.8% of Democrats planned to vote for Biden, with only 5.5% undecided, and 76.2% of Republicans planned to vote for Trump and 19.2% were undecided.

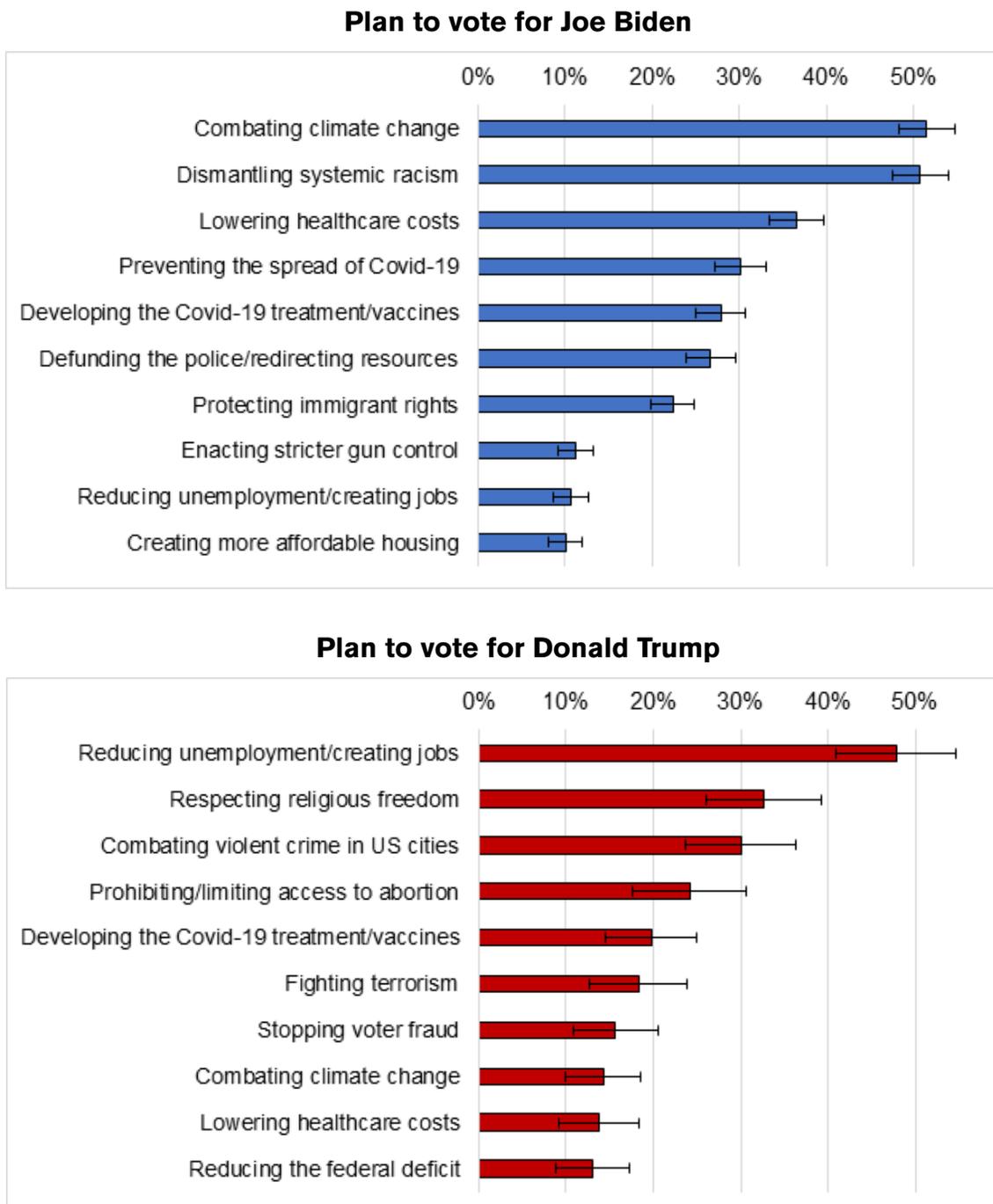


Most important political issues

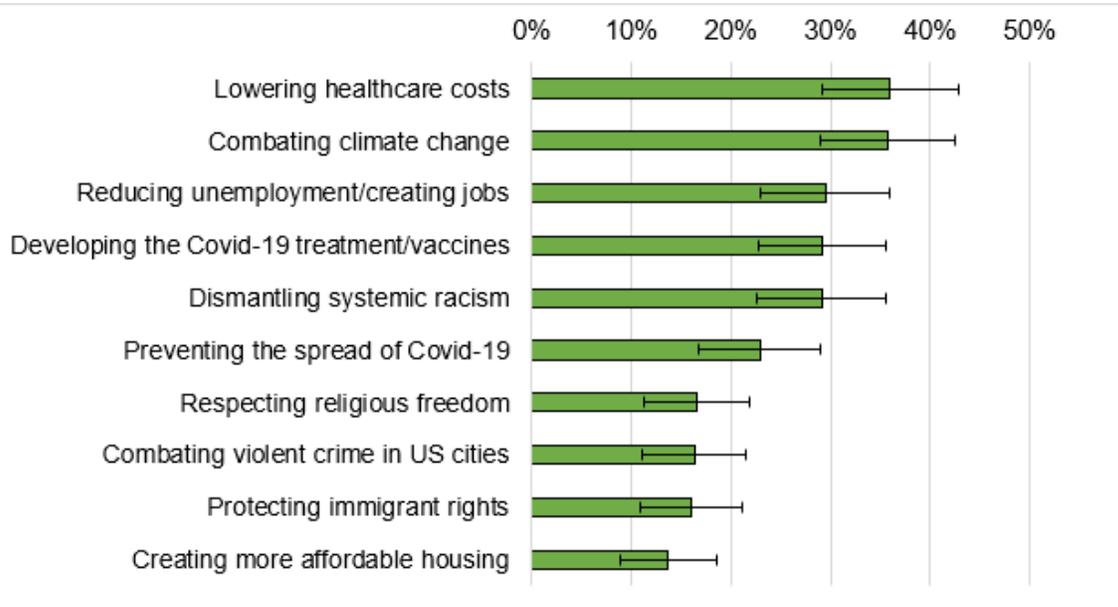
Our pre-election survey asked participants to identify the top three issues that the President or Congress should address (see Figure 1). More than half of young adults who planned to vote for Biden ranked “combating climate change” and “dismantling racism” as among the most important issues, while more than one-third listed “lowering healthcare costs.” Conversely, the top

issues for those who planned to vote for Trump were “reducing unemployment and creating jobs,” “respecting religious freedom,” and “combating violent crime in US cities.” Top issues for young adults who were undecided leading up to the election included a mix of priorities with “lowering healthcare costs,” “combating climate change,” and “reducing unemployment and creating jobs” rounding out the top three.

Figure 1. What are the most important issues for the President and Congress to address?



Undecided Voters



Note: Displaying adjusted percentages (95% CIs) from logistic regression models that also control for racial/ethnic and gender identity, age, student status, and Arizona region (n = 1,418).



These differences in issue rankings by political affiliation largely mirror patterns by race/ethnicity (Henn et al. 2022, Della Volpe 2022). Although the young adults who responded to our pre-election survey disproportionately thought of themselves as Democrats, whites were more than 2.5 times as likely to support Donald Trump or the Republican party in comparison to young adults of color. As a result, the Democrats and Biden-voters in our sample – as well as Independents, the majority of whom reported voting for Biden in interviews conducted post-election – represent a racially-diverse group, while young adults who identified as Republicans or Trump-voters were overwhelmingly white. Notably, Latinx respondents were more likely to rank “protecting immigration rights” as a top issue, while addressing Covid-19 was ranked as very important for Native youth. In interview responses, many Native young adults described the suffering of relatives living on tribal reservations as resources and long travel times for equitable healthcare devastated local Native communities (Lively 2021, Yellow Horse et al. 2022; Booth, 2022)

Why did you vote?

During the post-election interviews, we asked participants to tell us what motivated them to vote. We found striking differences between those who voted for Biden or Trump. While Biden voters overwhelmingly pointed to the need for change, Trump voters were concerned with furthering conservative values, and those who were undecided seemed more focused on social issues. For Biden voters, concerns about Trump's handling of the COVID pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and foreign policy needed urgent change. Miguel, a 27 year old Democrat from Yuma felt that "the country was going in a totally backwards direction... It's been a stressful four years, honestly."

Trump voters were more concerned with conservative values like abortion and taxes. Tanner, a 23 year old Republican from Phoenix, stated that "Donald Trump is who I voted for, actually, both times because I just felt like he aligned more with my religious values, but also values in general." Jonathan, a 25 year old Republican from Phoenix also described voting for Trump because "I'm just a conservative person. I will put in and give my vote to someone that is the most conservative, someone who has Judeo-Christian values, and someone who still believes...in being an American." Many Republican young adults fervently opposed abortion and taxation and viewed the Republican party as more in tune with their conservative values.



Tyler, a 20 yr old Democrat from Flagstaff: "Real equality for EVERYONE not just written on paper."



James, a 26 year old Republican from Flagstaff: "This is one of my top three reasons for voting Republican."



Louis, a 24 year old Republican from Phoenix: "The most important issue of the election for me was abortion. I will never apologize for saying I vehemently appose abortion. I have always been against it and will fight for the rights of the unborn."



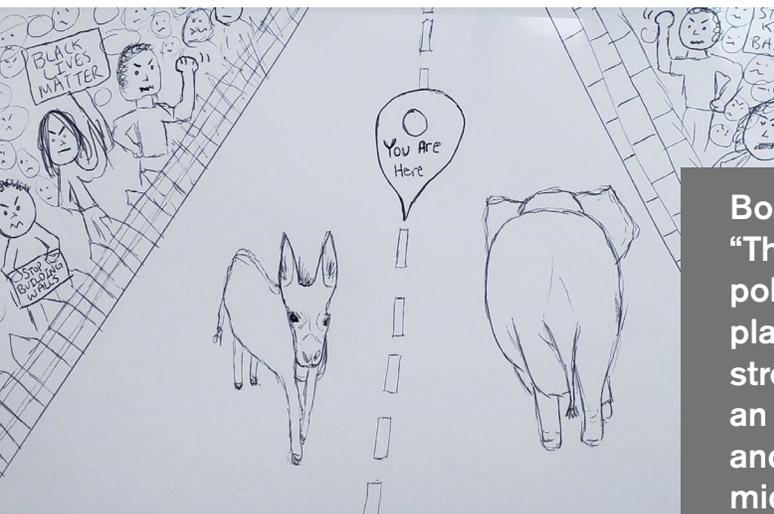
Karina, a 20 year old Independent from Phoenix: “I sent this picture because I do not like to stick to either party and I prefer to choose my candidates based on merit not what their party is.”

In tune with Arizona’s increasing Independent voter rolls, a sizable number of participants considered themselves Independent voters who base their vote on candidates’ qualifications and how well they align with their views.

They see themselves as straddling the middle leaving them without representation in a two-party political structure. Daniella, 20 year old Independent from Yuma, explained this politically ambivalent position when saying,

“Politically wise, I’m in the middle. I see the Democrats’ side and the Republicans’ side. I do kind of lean a bit more towards Democrat, in some cases, but that just depends on what issues I’m looking at, and what issues one group has to offer, compared to the other. So, I’m kind of in the middle, can’t really say where I lean most of the time.”

Like Daniella, these ambivalent young voters tended to gravitate towards Democrats, but voiced their disappointment with the lack of representation outside the two-party system.



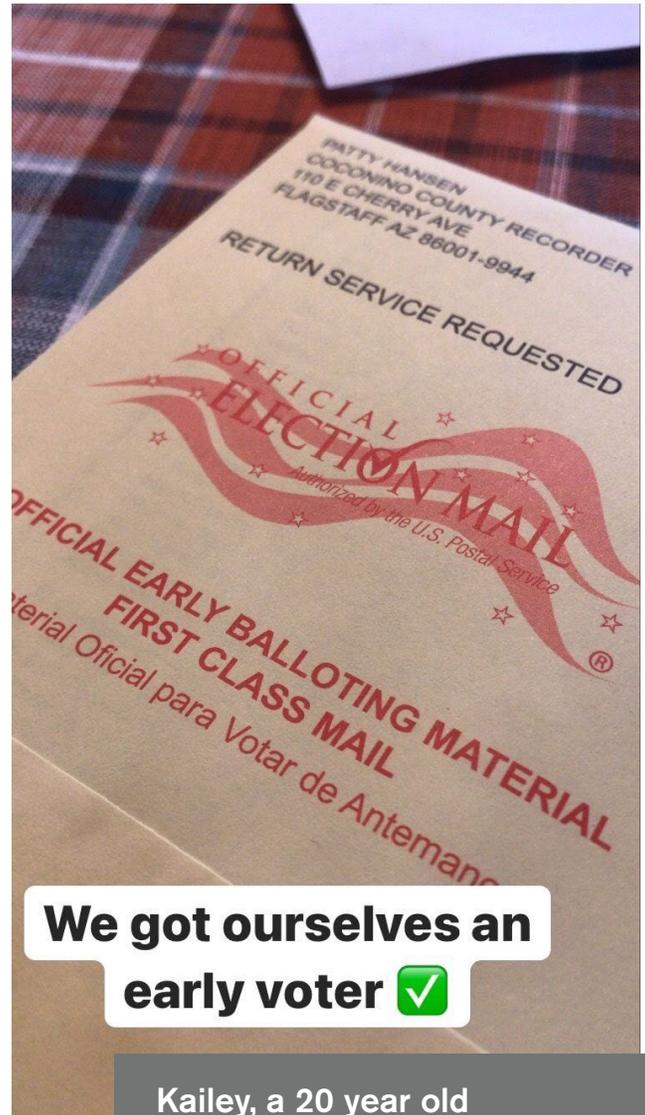
Bonnie, a 23 year old Independent from Phoenix: “This picture, which I drew, represents my political views because I frequently feel out of place, as if I am caught in the middle of a busy street. There is conflict on both sides, and never an alternative option to the assumptions made and stances taken, so I choose to stay in the middle of the road, gathering information without getting too involved.”



Alicia, a 25 year old Independent from Flagstaff, identifies as a moderate. Having initially registered as an Independent but wanting to vote in the 2016 primaries, Alicia switched party affiliation to Republican. Yet in 2020, Alicia voted for Biden and commented that “It makes me sick that it says Republican on my voter card but I figured Arizona’s still like a red state, so hopefully it [vote for Biden] will count more that way.”

Why Voting Matters

Regardless of their political orientation or who they voted for, participants were aware that Arizona is a “purple state” that is shifting from Republican to Democrat. Like Alicia, they felt that voting was crucial and that each vote mattered in this battleground state. Carolina, an 18 year old from Yuma who identified as Democrat says, “I wanted my vote to count and I knew it would count. Because of the state I live in. The state I live in is Republican and I knew that maybe my vote could make the change and turn my state from Republican to Democrat.” Tanner, a 23 year old Republican from Phoenix, also felt that his vote was crucial and stated that “ And I would say wanting to vote because I know that Arizona has been swinging towards more blue, and so trying to lean a little more towards red.” Some youths felt that every vote counts, particularly with the electoral college system. Victoria, a 20 year old Democrat from Phoenix felt it is important to vote “even though I have heard that my vote doesn’t matter. I have heard that it does influence the final vote [Electoral College] of the candidate...I saw the results from the popular vote [in 2016], and the wrong one was chosen. It’s like, how did that happen?”



We got ourselves an early voter ✓

Kailey, a 20 year old Independent from Flagstaff: “I’m an early voter, and doing something as simple as voting. I post on my stories, as shown in the picture above. I encourage to vote but not who to vote for.”

Settling for Biden or Trump

When asked why they voted for a particular candidate, those who voted for Biden were not particularly excited about their choice but viewed Biden as a better candidate than Trump, or cited specific social policies that Biden supports. Kellen, a 20 year old Democrat from Tucson, sums up these youths' feelings towards Biden when saying,

“Primarily he’s not Trump. I don’t love Biden. I’m not going to pretend that I do, but it’s one of those situations in which you realize we are a very bipartisan system. One of those two candidates is going to win, so it’s very much... I examine my values. I want to fix climate change. I want to stop police brutality. I want someone who can handle the pandemic. Maybe Joe isn’t going to deliver on all of those, but he sure is hell going to deliver on them a lot more than Trump is. There’s no perfect

candidate, but you have to at least for right now work within the system that’s in place or else nothing is ever going to change.”

Similarly, Independents who voted for Biden said their vote was mainly against Trump and his hardline policies rather than for Biden. Mindy, a 21 year old Independent from Flagstaff explained,

“Really just the fact that we’re in a swing state and I really don’t want Trump again. I don’t even really like Biden. I just feel like he’s better than Trump because he’s shown that he’s not anti-gay, he’s shown for the most part that he’s not like anti-black, or anti-immigrant, and that’s really important. So yeah, I think I’ve heard a lot of like, oh, they’re both the same candidate when really they’re not, these things are important to me and my friends.”

Natalie, a 23 year old Democrat from Tucson: “I am not for Biden, I’m just anti-Trump.”

Kiara, a 21 year old Democrat from Phoenix: “This is a photo of me civically engaging. I took it yesterday at the polls.”



Republican youth were often critical of Trump’s shortcomings, and some did not like Trump, but still voted for him because their conservative values outweighed Trump’s flaws. Scott, a 24 year old from Phoenix, described Trump as a “little loopy man” and a “little bit nuts,” and acknowledged that “he is not exactly the best person either.” Yet, he voted for Trump because “of his business knowledge and because he’s got guts... he just runs it like a business, he doesn’t give a crap...even though he is a little bit crazy, maybe his craziness would help

us a little bit more than Joe Biden being a puppet.” Myra, a 23 year old Republican from Phoenix, pointed to her conservative values as the main reason she voted for Trump when saying, “I do not believe in abortion, I am pro-life 110%. Abortion was the biggest topic for me in the election”. Myra, like other conservative voters, believe that Trump would further conservative values.



Moving away from Partisan Affiliation

Although it is assumed young people in general align with the Democratic Party, our study suggests that young voters' support for Democrats cannot be taken for granted. We found that a substantial number of young adults identified as Independents, but they voted for Biden because the social conservatism of the Republican party is skewed away from their interests, or they saw it as the only viable way to oust Trump (Pitzl, 2014). These young adults' hesitancy towards Democrats is expressed by Ulysses, an Independent, age 23:

"I heard a lot of rhetoric in the Democratic party, about how we want to return to normalcy, to go back to how it was before. The problem with before is, it wasn't that much better! It was awful, why would I bother? Why would I say I'm just going to vote for the same thing? The person's going to be polite, use polite language...be a dignified president. But I don't want a dignified person to keep doing all these awful policies and practices. When COVID happened, I was like...It'll be few cases, it'll be gone, so it made me not worry just yet. Then the cavalier attitude of the administration was like almost like no, this is a joke. This is a hoax, it's not real. A failure to even grapple with the pandemic made me realize okay, I think I actually need an administration that cares a little bit, or

would have done something. That's the biggest thing that changed my mind."

Even those who identified as Democrats were critical of their Party's slate but identified with the socially-minded agenda of the party.

The message we got loud and clear is that neither party is tending to the interests of young adults, and our findings signal a move away from partisan affiliation as more young adults identify as Independents who will vote along personal values rather than strict party lines. The choice to be unaffiliated and vote based on values rather than partisan loyalty continues to grow in Arizona and across the nation, especially with young adults who feel participation in a two-party system doesn't serve their interests or represent their concerns. Yet, it was not only Independents that raised these concerns. Democrat and Republican young voters were also disillusioned with their voting choices. As political division intensifies, young voters pull towards political independence and as they become critically-minded political actors, they may shape a new democracy where a two party-system will likely become irrelevant.

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