

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

Today's Young People and Their Political Gloom

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7dp3q3k1>

Authors

Wray-Lake, Laura

Kinnard, Lauren

Publication Date

2025-05-01

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

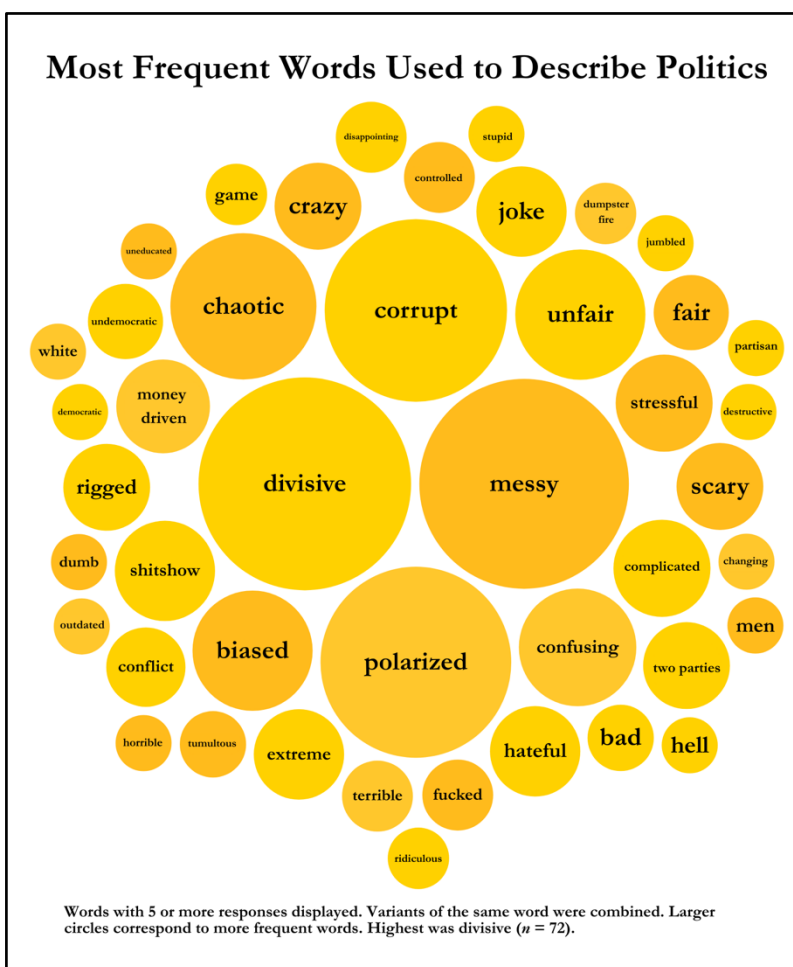
Today's Young People and Their Political Gloom

Laura Wray-Lake, PhD & Lauren Kinnard, MS

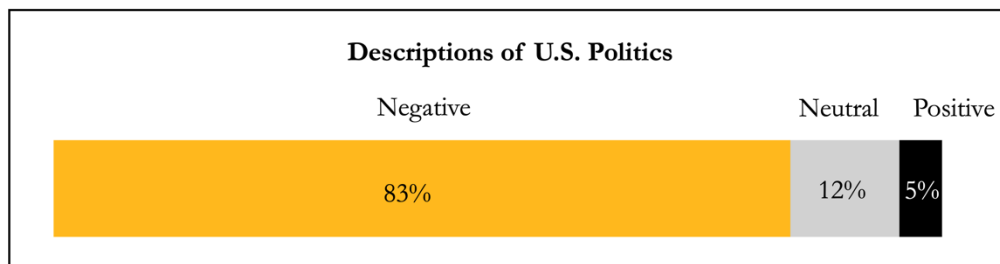
Young people have a lot at stake in government decisions – from their education, health, and safety to the climate they will inherit. Adolescents and young adults often pay much more attention to politics than we recognize, and political climates they experience can shape their worldviews now and across their lifespan. Various polls capture adults' views to keep us informed about public opinion, but young people are an important part of the public, too.

We surveyed 971 14-20-year-olds in the two weeks following the 2024 election to take their pulse on the current state of U.S. politics. Our study methodology is summarized [here](#). With the population of today's teens more diverse than ever on [race, gender, and sexuality](#), it is especially important to hear the opinions of a diverse group of young people. Our sample was 27% white, 23% multiracial, 17% Black, 14% Hispanic or Latine, and 16% Asian, and 24% LGBTQ. Politically, 59% identified as liberal, 32% as moderate or unsure of their views, and 7% as conservative.

When asked what word they would use to describe U.S. politics, young people overwhelmingly expressed negative sentiments. The most widely expressed view was that politics was divisive, followed by messy, polarized, and corrupt. Rounding out the top 10 were chaotic, unfair, biased, confusing, shitshow, and complicated. In total, 83% of responses were negative. [Historical trend analyses](#) since the 1970s show that adolescents' outlooks on politics and government vary depending on the times, but are not always wholly negative. Negative responses were 7 times more frequent than neutral responses (which made up 12% of responses) and 17 times more frequent than positive responses (5% of all responses). The top neutral response was "two parties".



Partisan discord and disunity were salient for many, as shown by frequent descriptions of politics as divisive, polarized, and conflictual. Moreover, 84% agreed that politics has become less respectful, and 76% agreed that people are becoming too extreme in their political views and that political polarization is a major problem in the country today.



In describing politics with terms like corrupt, unfair, rigged, money-driven, and undemocratic, young people expressed views that politics is not functioning well. Only 34% felt satisfied with how U.S. democracy works, and most viewed government institutions unfavorably on average: 57% had an unfavorable opinion of Congress and 64% had an unfavorable opinion of the Supreme Court.

Youth's top descriptors about politics conveyed negative emotions including confusion, fear, and stress. A notable 79% of young people reported sometimes or often feeling nervous or distressed about the election in the month before. Overall, young people had a dismal national outlook, with only 18% feeling satisfied with how things are going in the country today.

Political gloom and pessimism have taken hold of many of today's young people. Their negative sentiments are strikingly similar to [adults' views](#), and we should take seriously the call for politics to be more unified, fair, and straightforward. Young people, a large demographic block in the U.S., join adults in pointing to a crisis of legitimacy in U.S. politics that can undermine our institutions and our democracy.

