

Campaign Memo

Youth Voter Engagement Strategy

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Introduction

As the 2026 midterm elections approach, youth voter turnout continues to be one of the biggest opportunities for progressive campaigns to propel towards success. While youth voters (those aged 18-29) are a part of an increasingly diverse subgroup of the United States electorate, in the past, they have repeatedly been shown to be under-engaged, especially during midterm elections. This, coupled with this age group's proven passion for social justice, political progress, and digital activism, presents an opportunity to redefine civic participation in the 21st century.

In order to mobilize youth voters in a way that is effective and beneficial, this campaign must go further than common advertising seen in mass media and appeal more to the media habits of the target audience, along with showing up in the spaces the audience does, understanding their values, identities, and topics they are passionate about can be just as impactful. The rest of this memo maps out the theories leading to this strategy as well as the actionable steps that make up this strategy. These ideas are formed from years of research in media effects and attempts to answer the question of “why?” when looking at the reasoning behind these steps.

Agenda Setting:

Agenda-setting theory says that the media plays a large role in deciding what issues people perceive as important issues, or what may be the most important issue. When looking at

agenda-setting in relation to youth voter engagement, it means campaigns need to intentionally set the agenda about issues that speak to young voters. These issues, like climate change, reproductive rights, student debt, gun violence, and racial justice, can help to reach this demographic through repeated content exposure.

Instead of relying only on traditional news and media outlets, today's agenda-setting power is spread out across our current fragmented media, which is currently being run by social platforms. Because of this, influencers are able to act as modern agenda-setters. They are able to create the narrative that becomes important to the youth and decide what will become a part of their conversations and discourse. This strategy is about using this information by partnering with these creators to plant campaign messages inside of their organic content as a way to reach users in the places they are, without it feeling like branded content.

Framing: The Meaning of Civic Participation

The theory of Framing displays that the way an issue or topic is presented can influence how people interpret it. Throughout history, voting has been framed as a civic duty or something that is our responsibility to do just because we are a part of this country. This approach has failed to connect with young people and has not encouraged or inspired them to participate in the political process of voting. The goal of this strategy is to pull from the idea of framing and paint voting as a form of self-expression, collective care, and resistance.

There are a multitude of ways to do this, but some of the most effective may be by creating frames that are culturally relevant, emotionally compelling, and that are active in their digital spaces. Things like hashtags can make a creative initiative that achieves this very purpose. Hashtags are used as a way to categorize content in online spaces and thus can be used as a sort

of symbol to identify oneself with a group, initiative, or movement. For example, “#MyFirstTime”, “#HotVoteSummer”, and “#TheyDontWantYouToVote”, could all be used by a campaign to garner attention and encourage Gen Z political participation. This works by aligning political participation with a sense of belonging to a group and attaching it to the online identity of the voter.

Framing can be super effective when it uses both cognitive and affective elements like storytelling, appealing to sense of humor, and using visuals and media mediums that are specific to the platform they are being presented on. The campaigns' use of these types of frames makes the content feel more tailored and familiar to the Gen Z audience, which can work to influence the behavior of these audiences. Analyzing Gen Z spaces and their content types gives a detailed roadmap on how to reach this key demographic.

Priming: Values & Identity

The theory of priming shows that when we are exposed to certain cues, those cues can change and/or create the foundation of our political evaluation process. When looking at Gen Z, the role of priming can help to reach them by focusing more on their values that have shaped their worldview, instead of just focusing on policy issues that may not speak to them in the same way and could deter them from being politically active. Talking about core values like justice, equality, equity, and fairness works to prime this audience prior to the election occurring. By priming this audience ahead of time, when these topics are brought up later on they may be more susceptible to the information being presented to them during the later parts of the campaign leading up to the election itself.

This strategy works by using value-based priming during the entirety of the campaign. Influencers can use storytelling, polling, and infographics on campaign platforms and other forms of media that appeal to Gen Z's values can be planted in various online spaces. All of these elements work together to reinforce the idea that voting is a part of who these individuals are, it's an extension of themselves, and closely connected to their core values and identity. If effective, this priming will have youth placing high importance on these ideas and core values when deciding whether or not to participate and which candidates to lend their support to.

Misinformation: Trust & Resilience

It's important to understand the role misinformation can play in political campaigns and impact the way individuals will interact with a campaign. Misinformation is most likely to have an effect on individuals who are disengaged, have not previously participated in the political process, or do not have strong media literacy. People often tend to believe whatever information that aligns with their current worldview. This can be beneficial when the younger generation has preexisting beliefs about justice and fairness, but can also hinder the campaign's success due to possible skepticism surrounding institutions. If this skepticism is not counteracted, it could have a negative impact on voter turnout.

As previously stated, this skepticism and overall lack of media literacy needs to be counteracted. In order to do that, this campaign needs to build up resilience to misinformation for Gen Z voters. This can be done through education and other various initiatives that encourage users to digest the information they are receiving, research sources, and think critically about information before they share it. By encouraging thoughtful and intentional scrolling and posting, individuals may be more likely to fact-check information in real time, as well as share

credible information that individuals and their network can trust is accurate and not misleading. By giving platform users the skills to exist in digital spaces and trust they are able to find factual information, we can build a new model of digital participation and create a system of peer-to-peer accountability.

Polling: Visibility & Group Identity

Another aspect that can impact Gen Z's likelihood to participate is polling. Polls can play a large role in helping to shape the narrative and also boosting voter engagement among young people. Including the youth in polls and allowing them to see themselves represented, along with their peers, motivates and empowers them to participate. This concept once again ties back to the ideas that political participation needs to become a part of their identity and make them feel a part of a group. If they see themselves as part of a group of people becoming politically active (maybe even for a specific candidate), they may follow suit. This can also have the opposite impact. If young voters are not represented in these polls, they may feel like it is something they do not need to be a part of and does not impact their “group” or their perceived identity.

Strategy Implementation

Phase One:

Phase one focuses on building the foundation of the plan and developing key relationships with individuals who will make this plan a success. We will select 100–125 influencers with large platforms across different platforms whose content aligns with the goals and values of the campaign. It is important that these creators represent the various kinds of diversity that make up Gen Z, including diversity when it comes to race, gender, sexuality, geographical location, and

socioeconomic status. Platform users need to feel like these influencers are relatable. It is also important that the creator's main content type is not currently information surrounding politics as followers of these used are likely already politically engaged, and we are attempting to activate non-engaged individuals.

Along with building these relationships, a content hub will be created that the influencers will be given access to. The hub will contain campaign-created information templates, graphics, and frequently updated information about the campaign. Throughout the time, different types of media will be used to see what types of narratives and approaches are most effective in engaging the youth.

Phase Two:

Phase two will see the official launch of the campaign. During this phase we will use messaging around three specific narratives using hashtags.

1. **#MyFirstTime:** This campaign works to share and learn about voters' experiences voting for the first time. This helps to make the process seem more relatable and a normal part of our lives. Whether it's someone's current first time voting or if they are a third time voting, sharing the story of their first time, this campaign helps to make voting feel like a trend that everyone wants to be a part of.
2. **#HotVoteSummer:** This takes a similar approach to the viral “BratSummer” tactics the 2024 Harris campaign used. It works to frame voting as something bold and empowering, something that belongs to young people. This specific campaign puts an emphasis on voter registration and making sure they get their friends to vote as well. It once again creates a feeling of being a part of something exclusive.

3. #TheyDontWantYouToVote: Once again, Gen Zs values are deeply rooted in justice and fairness, this narrative approach works to put a spotlight on voter suppression tactics with a goal of igniting a fire underneath them to treat voting as an act of defiance. The information of this narrative and the stories being told will come from marginalized people who are directly impacted by acts of voter suppression.

These campaigns will be launching in coordinated times on different platforms through different media mediums taking over different digital spaces. With the help of influencers this can work to get young voters excited and ready to participate.

Phase Three:

Phase three is one of the most intense phases, where all channels will be working at full capacity to increase voter registration, fight misinformation, educate voters, and increase awareness. This phase will focus on a few main activations:

1. Voting pledges where digital users can share campaign-related graphics with their network, so that they will be voting in the upcoming election.
2. Using video and graphics to educate voters on what to expect on election day (how to find a polling location, what their ballot may look like, what they need to bring with them, etc.)
3. Hosting in-person rallies on various college campuses around the country, where attendees are encouraged to create content at the rally and share it with their network.
4. Disperse “defeat misinformation” content that creators can share to combat the spread of misinformation.

Peer-to-peer communication will be one of the main focuses driving this phase of the plan. Creators, volunteers, and everyday people will be able to communicate with their network, create excitement, educate, fight misinformation, and increase voter turnout. By having their own network be a part of their activation, individuals will be more trusting, and if done effectively, they will be more likely to vote.

Measure & Manage: Success & Risk

When tracking the success of this plan, there will be a few key metrics to track:

1. Voter Turnout: Did the percentage of eligible youth voters who actually vote increase since the last election?
2. Digital Reach and Engagement: How many people were reached via digital activations, and did they engage with the content?
3. Resilience to Misinformation: Was there a reduction in the percentage of people who believe misinformation?
4. Creator Satisfaction: Were the creators who played a major part in the plan stratified with the campaign, and would they like to continue working together?

While all of these things are important to understand the success of the plan, its important to understand the things that could have a negative impact on it:

1. Platform algorithms: These are ever changing so what is working at the start of the campaign may not continue to work, and this could simply be due to changes in algorithms and not due to a messaging problem.

2. Creators: When using creators do spread information on behalf of this campaign, its important to understand that we cannot control the actions of these creators or the narratives they

spin. It is possible for a creator to “go rouge”, or, after they have aligned themselves with us, they start to spread misinformation themselves or just disparage the campaign thus misleading the voters.

3. The Youth: While the youth vote is the goal of this entire plan, it is important to understand that their skepticism towards institutions and political figures may not be able to be won over. Their skepticism may remain intact and could only cement their non-participation.

Conclusion

This strategy is a guideline to take Gen Z from passive consumers of the world to active participation in the electoral process. This plan is rooted in the heavy research theories (agenda setting, framing, priming, misinformation, etc.) and if executed properly, can mobilize an entire generation of political participation from Gen Z for the 2026 midterms and in all future elections.