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Talking about Kennedy, Stein & Trump with Young Voters



Third Way,

Third parties could be a decisive factor in the 2024 presidential election, creating a spoiler effect in key states that would usher in a catastrophic second Donald Trump presidency. The third-party vote has cost Democrats two wins in the last six presidential elections, and there is ample reason to believe that RFK Jr., Jill Stein, and others pose an even bigger threat this cycle. It is vital that everyone in the anti-Trump coalition be armed with the most persuasive messaging to confront this threat in 2024.

Young voters, 18-to-29 years old, were the largest age cohort to vote third party in 2016, with third parties retaining 10% support from this group. And according to publicly-available polls, third-party candidates are once again siphoning critical sums of young voters this year—especially among those who supported Biden in 2020. To combat this threat, Third Way and GBAO conducted a nationwide survey of 1,500 likely voters ages 18-29 to test which anti-RFK Jr. and Stein messages

are most effective at peeling off young potential third-party voters for Democrats and to test how effective anti-Trump messages are in comparison.

Education around RFK Jr.

In general, messages that painted RFK Jr. as a strange crank with far-right positions were significantly more effective than those connecting Kennedy to Trump and the MAGA far right. We found that a few messages were most effective above all with moving Kennedy's base of young voters away from him and towards Democrats: his anti-vax conspiracy record, his parroting of Vladimir Putin's propaganda, and his abortion ban stances.

The strongest anti-RFK Jr. attacks among this young voter sample were:

- **Anti-Vax/Conspiracies:** When informed that “RFK Jr. has a long history of anti-vaccine advocacy and touting far-right conspiracies. He has falsely claimed that Wi-Fi and vaccines cause autism and has spread conspiracies that COVID-19 is, ‘ethnically targeted...to attack Caucasians and Black people,’ and that chemicals in water are making kids transgender,” 65% of young voters expressed concern, with 43% very concerned.
- **Putin's Propagandist:** When told that “Kennedy consistently touts Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine, saying that Russian dictator, Vladimir Putin, has acted in, ‘good faith’ as he commits war crimes,” two-thirds of young voters were concerned, with 38% very concerned.
- **Abortion Ban:** And when educated that “RFK Jr. supports a 15-week abortion ban, says that government has a, ‘claim’ to unborn children, and says that he will re-evaluate approval of abortion medication used in 60 percent of procedures. And his running mate has spent millions of dollars attacking in-vitro fertilization,” 63% of young voters said this concerned them, with 37% very concerned.

Meanwhile, messages that attempted to connect Kennedy to the MAGA far right were about 10 percentage points less effective with young voters. The lowest testing message was Kennedy's climate hypocrisy statements, saying he would roll back the largest clean energy investment in world history (52% total concerned).

When we look at what the most effective messages were with young RFK Jr. voters in particular, we found that Kennedy's statements on Russia (63% total concerned/37% very concerned), Kennedy's anti-vax/conspiracy record (56% total concerned/33% very concerned), and Kennedy's abortion ban (57% total concerned/28% very concerned) tested the best with this group as well.

Interestingly, Kennedy's opposition to a ceasefire deal in the Israel-Gaza conflict was similarly unpopular with his young voter base—and this message may very well serve as a persuasion point,

as the Israel–Gaza conflict was the second biggest deal–breaker issue for young Kennedy voters, behind abortion:

- **Israel–Gaza Ceasefire:** When young voters learned that “RFK Jr. opposes a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza. He says that Israel is a, ‘moral nation’, and that Palestinians are, ‘the most pampered people by international aid organizations,’” 49% of young voters said this concerned them, with 30% very concerned.

This education around key issues was very effective with young voters. After hearing the anti–Kennedy battery of messages, **Kennedy’s support was cut in half, going from 14% support to 7% in the multi–candidate presidential horserace—with the majority of Kennedy defectors moving to Joe Biden.**

Education around Jill Stein

Making the case against Jill Stein similarly requires painting her as Putin’s puppet as well as an anti–war hypocrite who has profited from the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. These messages were significantly more salient with her voters than any MAGA–funded spoiler attacks.

The strongest anti–Stein messages among the entire young voter electorate were:

- **Putin’s Puppet:** When educated that “Jill Stein is a supporter of Russian dictator Vladimir Putin. Stein dined with Putin before the 2016 election, Russia helped promote her campaign, and she has parroted Russian propaganda and conspiracies ever since. She even claims that Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine is a, ‘provoked response,’ to aggressive moves by the US,” 66% of young voters were concerned, with 35% very concerned.
- **Anti–War Hypocrite:** When informed that “Jill Stein claims to be an anti–war candidate, but she is a hypocrite who owns stock in weapons companies and has profited from war in Ukraine and Gaza,” 62% of young voters were concerned, with 30% very concerned.
- **Climate Fraud:** When told that “Jill Stein pretends to care about the environment, but she and her husband have millions of dollars invested in fossil fuel companies. She criticized the passage of the largest clean energy investment in history, while also profiting off of the Keystone XL pipeline,” 59% of young voters were concerned, with 30% very concerned.

Meanwhile, messages that attacked Stein for being backed by MAGA billionaires who want to help Trump and for being a spoiler aiding Trump in both the 2016 and 2024 elections were 20 to 25 percentage points less salient than the messages above with young voters.

Stein voters’ top deal breaker issue was overwhelmingly the Israel–Gaza conflict, and it appears that a **message of Stein being a hypocritical anti–war candidate profiting off wars in Ukraine and**

Gaza was by far the most potent message with Stein's voter base (70% total concerned/33% very concerned). Among Stein voters, the next strongest attack message was Stein's climate hypocrisy (53% total concerned/29% very concerned), and Stein's dubious Russia connections (50% total concerned/26% very concerned).

This education similarly moved young voters. After the anti-Stein battery of messages, Stein's support was cut in half, going from 4% support to 2% in the multi-candidate presidential horserace—with two-thirds of Stein defectors moving to Joe Biden.

Anti-Donald Trump Message Tests

The conventional wisdom has been that negative partisanship against Trump would be the most effective weapon to keep potential Democratic voters from defecting to third parties. And while Trump attacks are indeed extremely salient with young voters, they are less effective at moving *third-party voters* towards Biden than messages that educate those voters about Kennedy and Stein directly.

Every single Trump attack we tested made over 40% of young voters very seriously concerned, meaning these messages are all extremely potent. The strongest anti-Trump messages among the young voter electorate were:

- **Abortion Ban & Surveillance:** When messaged that “Trump has supported a national abortion ban, and he says he will roll back access to birth control, support state governments monitoring women's pregnancies, and undo a policy that protects women from criminal prosecution if they crossed state lines to get an abortion,” 69% of young voters were concerned, with 52% very concerned.
- **Dictator:** When told that “Trump has said that he will be a dictator on day one, prosecute his political rivals, and pardon every rioter who attacked the Capitol on January 6th. And he will once again try to overturn future elections,” 68% of young voters were concerned, with 50% very concerned.
- **ACA Repeal:** When educated that “Trump has promised to repeal the Affordable Care Act and deny Americans with pre-existing conditions health insurance coverage, raising costs for basic health care needs,” 68% of young voters were concerned, with 47% very concerned.
- **Deportation of Migrants:** When informed that “Trump is ready to mount a war on law-abiding immigrant families. He has vowed to deploy the military to enact, ‘the largest domestic deportation operation’ in history, to separate migrant families and deport children alone, to end the “Dreamer” program, and to roll back legal migration into the US,” 68% of young voters were concerned, with 46% very concerned.

Kennedy and Stein defectors similarly found these messages to be the most potent in eliciting high concerns about Trump. However, after the anti-Trump battery, Biden's support remained constant, and these messages did not make third-party defectors any more likely to support the president. The Trump attacks were effective in lowering the former president's support by three points in the multi-candidate horserace with young voters, with most of these Trump defectors going to Kennedy. This means while anti-Trump attacks remain effective in holding Biden's young voter base together and doing minor damage to Trump, **anti-Trump attacks may not be quite as effective for winning back young voters who have defected to third parties or are considering voting for a third-party candidate.**

Conclusion

The presidential race is extremely fluid at this moment, but one strategy moving forward for the anti-Trump coalition remains clear: to defeat Donald Trump and win back young Biden defectors, we must wage a powerful messaging campaign to educate younger voters about third-party candidates. Kennedy is vulnerable as far right on vaccines and abortion and is actively parroting Vladimir Putin's propaganda, and Stein is similarly undefined on her anti-war hypocrisy and her dubious relationship with the Russian dictator. When young voters are presented with this messaging, they overwhelmingly defect from these third-party candidates and make the conclusion that Joe Biden is the best horse to back in the current race. The anti-Trump coalition has an opportunity to learn from the 2000 and 2016 elections and recognize that in a razor thin election, softening third-party support may very well be the deciding factor in 2024.

Methodology

Third Way and GBAO conducted this nationwide survey of 1,500 likely voters aged 18-29 via cell phone, text-to-web, and online panel between June 20-30 with a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points.