

MEMO Published July 1, 2024 • 10 minute read

Young Voters in 2024: Ideology, Top Issues, and Testing the Trump Record vs the Biden-Harris Record



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Takeaways

- A 49% plurality of young voters identify as moderate and believe that the Democratic Party is to the left of where they are.
- Young voters' top priority is inflation/the economy. Thirty-four percent rate it their top priority, and when affordable housing (8%) is thrown in, over 42% of voters prioritize economic issues above anything else.
- Twenty-four percent of young voters find abortion to be a deal breaker issue and would not vote for a candidate who disagrees with their position.
- Student loan forgiveness is the most well-known Biden-Harris policy action among young voters, but it is ten points less persuasive than other accomplishments: healthcare/reducing drug costs and infrastructure investments.
- Trump's family separation policy was most concerning to young voters, followed by Trump's anti-abortion actions and his attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Polls have shown for months that Joe Biden had been losing ground with young voters. Some in the Democratic coalition suggested that the way to win back this cohort was to move to the far left, yet Third Way's poll shows that such conventional wisdom for Vice President Harris is a losing strategy. This memo breaks down how young voters' ideology and issue priorities suggest that the path forward is through the mainstream center—not by tacking to the left.

We further wanted to understand how much young voters recall about the policies and actions taken during the Trump and Biden-Harris administrations, and which actions are the most salient with young voters. As it turns out, some of the more lefty policies that were enacted during the Biden-Harris administration, such as student loan forgiveness and climate investments, are less persuadable than some of the more bipartisan economic accomplishments—especially among young swing voters.

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 May 9–19 with a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points. Here is a [detailed note](#) about additional modal findings and comparisons.

Young voters are more moderate than the chattering class believes...

There's a perception among some in the chattering class that young voters are soft on the Democratic Party because it is too moderate, that young voters are overwhelmingly liberal, and that young voters are turning away from the Democratic Party in droves. However, this poll shows that these claims are a far cry from reality.

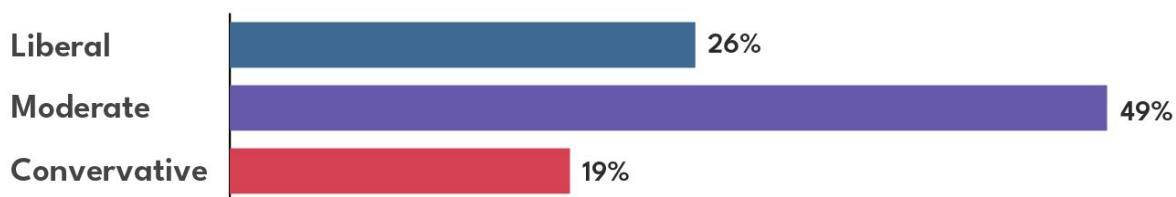
A 49% plurality of young voters identifies as ideological moderates, followed by 26% liberal and 19% conservative. This is well in line with what other prominent pollsters have found, such as the Harvard Institute of Politics, which found that a 43% plurality of 18-to-29-year-olds identified as moderate.



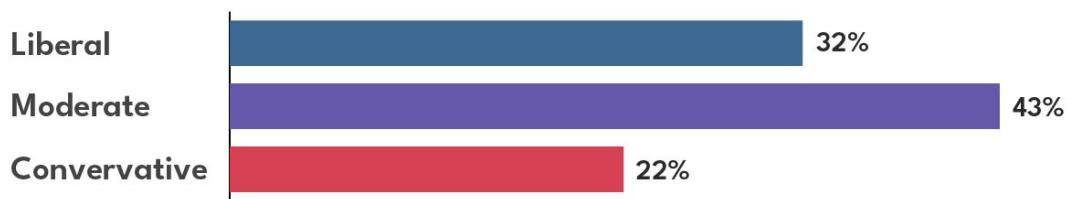
A Plurality of Young Voters Are Moderate

■ Liberal ■ Moderate ■ Conservative

Third Way



Harvard IOP



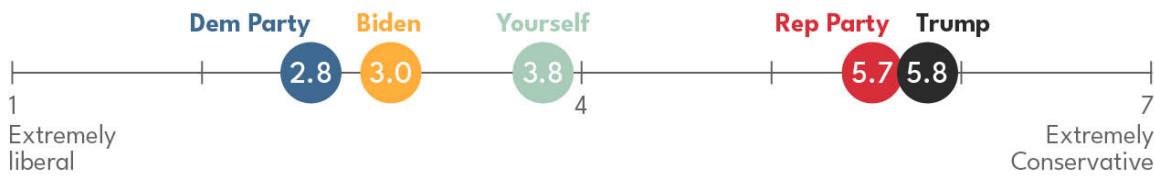
Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024. Harvard IOP Nationwide Poll: n=2,098 18-to-29-year-olds; MOE +/-2.9%; fielded Oct. 23 to Nov. 6, 2023.

Furthermore, when we asked young voters to place themselves, the political parties, and the presidential candidates on a seven-point ideology scale (with one being extremely liberal and seven being extremely conservative), we found that young voters view Biden and the Democratic Party as

more liberal than they are. They put the Democratic Party at 2.8/7 on the ideological scale, while they put themselves at 3.8/7 and Trump at 5.8/7. We found that Biden was underperforming with young voters primarily because of his age, not because he was insufficiently progressive. Tacking to the left would serve only to further alienate the plurality of moderate young voters that Vice President Harris needs to win and would play into the narrative that Trump intends to push: that the Democratic Party is full of radical leftists, when in reality it is anything but.

Ideology

Please rate one on a scale of one to seven, where one is **extremely liberal** and seven is **extremely conservative**.



Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.



Despite claims that young voters are turning away from the Democratic Party en masse, we found that 38% of young voters are self-described Democrats, and when independents are asked which party they lean towards, 55% of young voters align with the Democratic Party, 32% identify as Republican, and only 13% are true independents. We also see that young voters are overwhelmingly breaking for the generic congressional Democrat 54-36%. The generic ballot is evidence enough that there is a path to winning young voters who may be lukewarm about the Democratic presidential nominee—but that is not by moving further to the left.

Inflation/the economy is the top issue for young voters, while abortion is the biggest deal breaker...

Persistent media coverage on far-left activists has dominated the conversation around what young voters' priority issues are. As it happens, the plurality of young voters care about what everyone cares about: inflation and costs. And moving focus away from addressing inflation in favor of climate or loans would be ill-advised.

Top Issues For Young Voters

Q: I'm going to read a list of issues. Please tell me which one of these is most important to you when deciding who to vote for in the election for President.

Issue	All 18-29 Voters	White	Hispanic	Black	Lib Dem	Mod/Cons Dem	Ind	Rep	Double Haters	3rd Party Voters
Inflation/economy	34%	36%	31%	38%	13%	31%	38%	51%	26%	34%
Israel/Gaza conflict	10%	7%	15%	7%	24%	5%	12%	3%	25%	16%
Abortion	8%	11%	4%	7%	15%	7%	7%	4%	9%	8%
Affordable housing	8%	6%	10%	16%	5%	12%	9%	5%	4%	8%
Immigration	8%	9%	11%	2%	1%	10%	5%	16%	4%	4%
Climate Change/enviro	6%	8%	3%	4%	13%	8%	5%	1%	7%	6%
Health care	5%	4%	5%	6%	6%	7%	5%	2%	6%	6%
LGBTQ issues	4%	5%	4%	4%	10%	2%	4%	2%	5%	3%
Crime	4%	4%	5%	5%	2%	4%	4%	7%	2%	3%
Guns	4%	4%	4%	4%	1%	5%	1%	5%	2%	2%
Student loan forgiveness	3%	2%	2%	5%	5%	5%	3%	1%	3%	3%

Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.



Inflation/the economy ranks as the top issue for young voters at 34%—and when affordable housing (8%) is thrown in, over 42% of voters are prioritizing economic issues above anything else. Israel-Gaza is the priority issue for 10% of young voters—24 points lower than inflation and the economy. Abortion and immigration also fall behind at 8%. Climate change is a top issue for 6% of voters, and student loan forgiveness ranks even lower at 3%. It's clear that going further to the left on these issues won't solve the young voter problem when the apparent top issue for young voters is focusing on the economy.

This is true especially with groups of voters that had been soft on Biden over several months.

Inflation/the economy is the top issue for 31 percent of young Hispanic voters and 38% of young Black voters. And RFK Jr. voters' top issue far and away is inflation/economy (46%) with abortion (9%) and affordable housing (9%) trailing.

Top Deal Breaker Issues For Young Voters

Q: Of the following issues, which one is an issue you feel so strongly about, you couldn't vote for a candidate who disagrees with you on it?

Issue	All 18-29 voters	White	Hispanic	Black	Dem	Ind	Rep	Double Haters	RFK Jr. Voters
Abortion	24%	25%	23%	28%	29%	23%	20%	22%	23%
Immigration	13%	13%	21%	6%	11%	9%	25%	6%	13%
Israel/Gaza conflict	13%	11%	11%	11%	13%	17%	5%	27%	16%
LGBTQ issues	9%	11%	8%	7%	13%	8%	7%	12%	3%
Guns	9%	11%	4%	9%	9%	7%	14%	3%	11%
Climate change/enviro	7%	5%	8%	8%	9%	7%	4%	8%	7%
2020 election legitimacy	5%	5%	5%	4%	5%	4%	3%	1%	3%
Student loan forgiveness	4%	2%	5%	10%	5%	3%	4%	3%	3%

Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.



Regarding deal breaker issues, we found that young voters across the board feel strongest on the issue of abortion. Twenty-four percent of young voters would not vote for a candidate who disagrees with their position on abortion, followed by 13% of voters who say this about immigration and the Israel/Gaza conflict.

Voters who rank immigration and Israel/Gaza as their top deal breakers are in two very different ideological camps. Republicans and 2020 Trump voters' top deal breaker is immigration, while liberal Democrats and double haters' top deal breaker is Israel/Gaza. This underscores that a small, loud, angry subset on both sides have an issue that will be a deal breaker to their vote, but the broader young voter electorate still sees abortion as the top deal breaker. And ultimately, voters who ranked the Israel/Gaza conflict as their top issue or deal breaker were sticking with Democrats and breaking for Biden 50-24% in the two-way race.

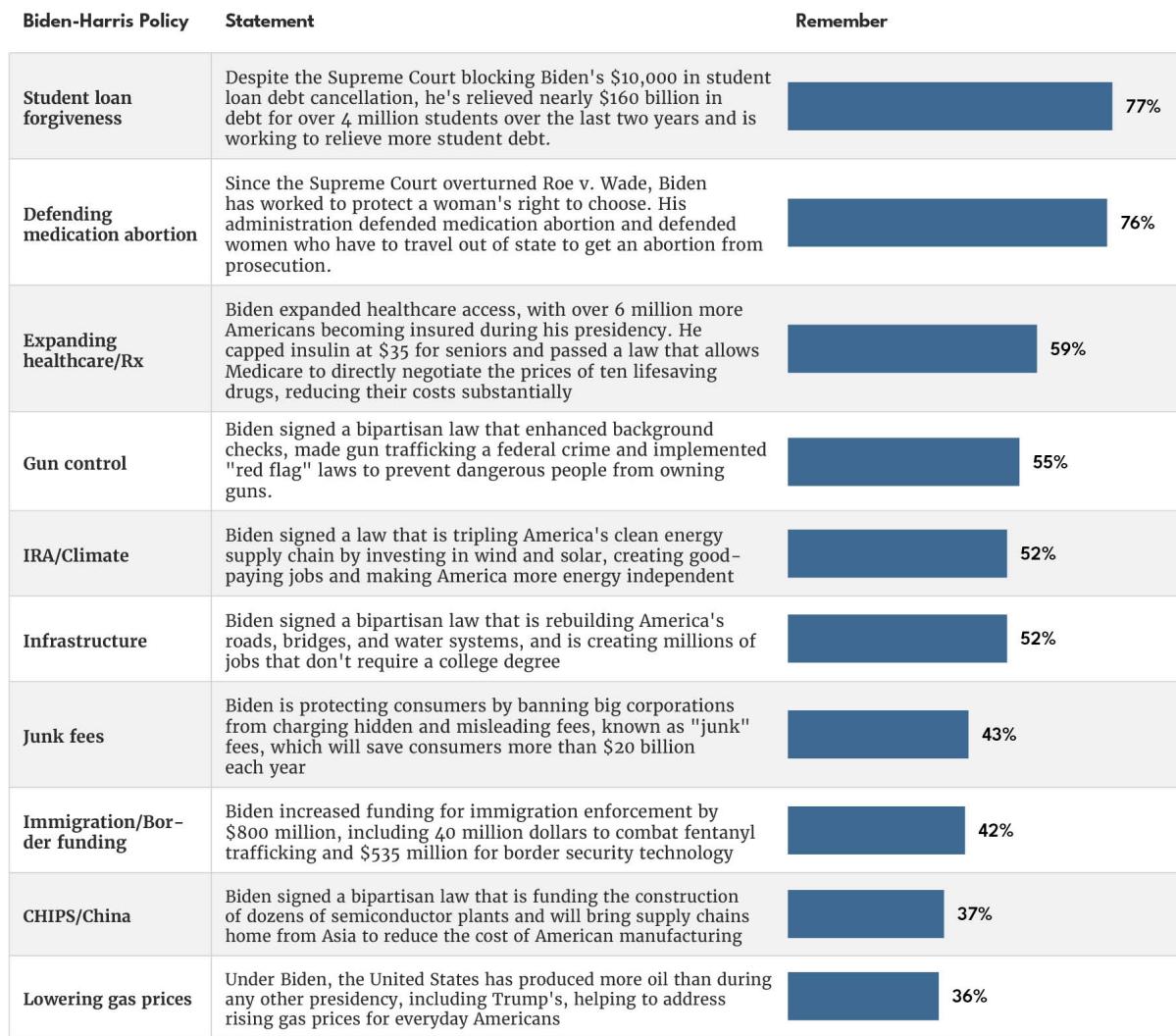
Democrats have lots of upside with reminding young voters about the Biden-Harris economic accomplishments...

The progressive wing of the Democratic Party has consistently pushed for the Biden-Harris administration's student loan forgiveness and climate accomplishments to be main planks of the 2024 campaign message. And while student loans and climate may satiate the leftier parts of the coalition, both appear to be far from the most persuadable messages to win over young swing voters.

Awareness of the Biden-Harris administration's accomplishments are highest on student loan forgiveness (77% recall) and defending access to abortion (76% recall). However, **loan forgiveness is ten points less persuasive than the administration's other economic accomplishments: healthcare/reducing drug costs and infrastructure investments.**

Awareness of Biden-Harris policies are highest on student loan forgiveness and defending medication abortion.

Q: I'm going to read you some statements about things Joe Biden has done during his presidency. After each, please tell me whether you remember hearing about this, or whether you do not remember hearing about it.



Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.



This presents a significant challenge Vice President Harris, given that the Biden-Harris administration's greatest (and most persuasive) legislative successes sit at just above 50% awareness with young voters. Importantly, young voters who were less certain that they would vote in November were 10 to 15 points less likely to have heard about the Biden-Harris administration's most persuasive economic accomplishments—presenting significant upside for informing and reminding young voters of this successful agenda.

When we tested which of the Biden–Harris administration’s actions were most persuasive with young voters, we found that expanding healthcare/reducing drug costs was the most popular accomplishment. **Sixty-three percent of young voters were more likely to support Democrats after hearing of the healthcare accomplishments, followed by the infrastructure law (60%), and defending abortion access (60%).** Falling behind was the climate investment law (57%) and student loan forgiveness (54%)—both of which are substantial accomplishments, but these are also fodder for the Democratic base and are less persuasive to young swing voters, especially young Black and Hispanic voters, than the more salient economic accomplishments.

Expanding healthcare/reducing Rx costs tops as the Biden-Harris administration's most persuasive accomplishments with young voters

Q: I'm going to read you some statements about things Joe Biden has done during his presidency. After each, please tell me whether you would be more likely or less likely to vote for him after hearing that, or if it would not make a difference.

Biden-Harris Policy	All 18-29 "more likely" to vote Dem	All 18-29 "much more likely" to vote Dem	Lib Dem	Mod/Cons Dem	Ind	Rep	White	Hispanic	Black	Double haters	2020 Biden voters	RFK Jr voters	Israel-Gaza voters
Healthcare	63%	35%	91%	79%	65%	28%	60%	63%	73%	78%	82%	67%	71%
Infrastructure	60%	30%	81%	75%	61%	31%	56%	63%	79%	66%	78%	66%	61%
Protecting abortion	60%	40%	90%	72%	60%	22%	57%	63%	63%	72%	80%	65%	61%
Guns	59%	33%	85%	73%	59%	29%	56%	58%	68%	66%	79%	66%	54%
Junk fees	58%	27%	81%	73%	57%	29%	55%	60%	73%	65%	75%	55%	67%
IRA/Climate	57%	33%	86%	72%	55%	27%	54%	57%	67%	66%	76%	65%	63%
Student loan forgiveness	54%	29%	84%	66%	54%	23%	50%	55%	65%	61%	73%	54%	56%
CHIPS/China	44%	18%	55%	53%	49%	21%	45%	38%	50%	48%	54%	50%	44%
Immigration/Border	39%	17%	41%	55%	33%	26%	36%	40%	48%	32%	50%	44%	36%
Lowering Gas prices	34%	15%	37%	49%	30%	19%	30%	31%	54%	25%	44%	39%	26%

Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/- 2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.

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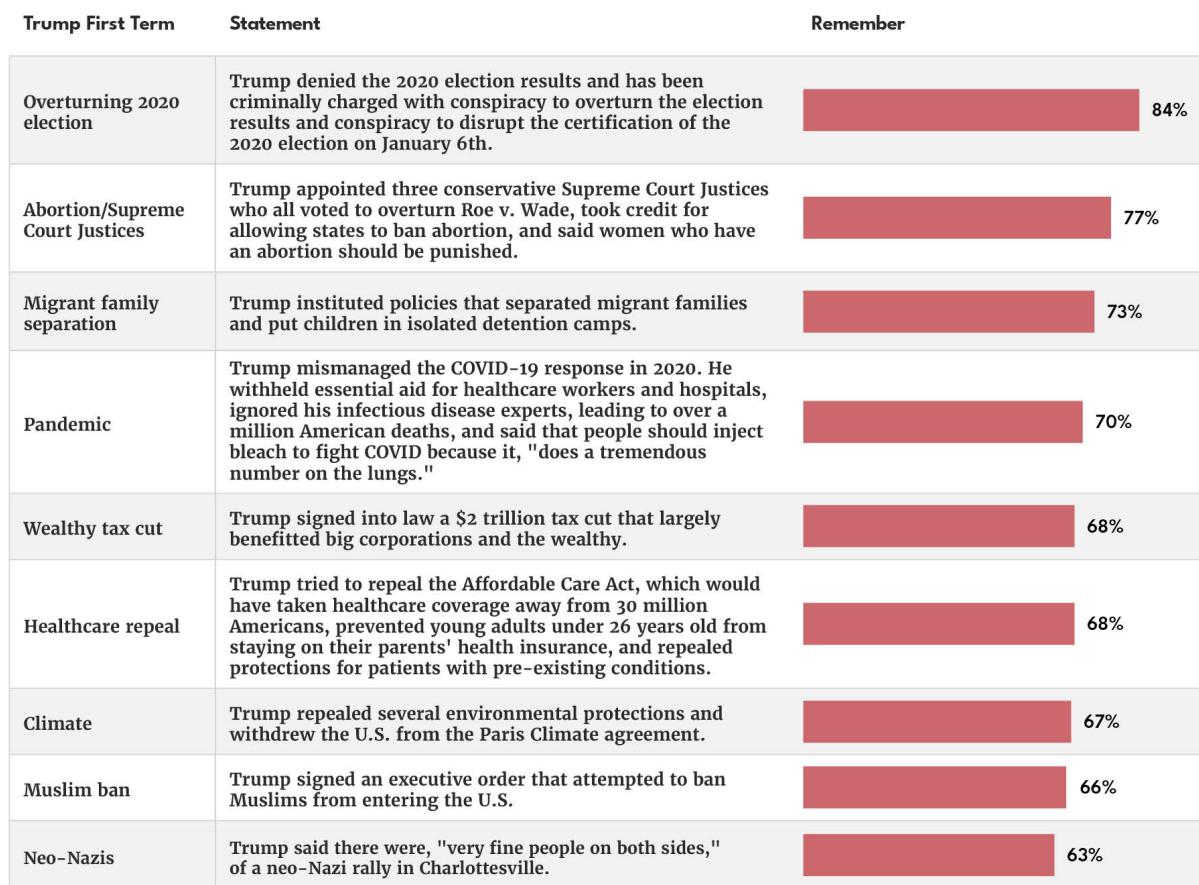
Trump is most vulnerable with young voters on his family separation policies and abortion...

A key tactic for Vice President Harris will be reminding voters—and in many cases educating young voters—about what Donald Trump did when he was in the White House. And it appears that Trump is most vulnerable on his family separation policy and his role in overturning *Roe*.

Young voters' awareness was highest of Trump's actions to overturn the 2020 election results (84% recall), his appointment of three conservative Supreme Court Justices that overturned *Roe v Wade* (77%), and his family separation policy (73%). Young voters were less likely to recall Trump's \$1.9 trillion tax cut and his attempt to repeal the ACA (68% recall) and withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accords (67%).

Young voters have a high awareness of Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 election results, overturning Roe, and family separation of migrants.

Q: I'm going to read you some statements about things Donald Trump did during his presidency. After each, please tell me whether you remember hearing about this, or whether you do not remember hearing about it.



Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.



Significantly, young voters who recalled fewer Trump policies were more likely to back Trump and RFK Jr. in a multi-candidate race—and these lower information voters were less certain they would vote in November. Additionally, young voters that did not vote in 2020 were less likely than the average young voter to remember most of Trump's actions, except for his mismanagement of the pandemic, highlighting the need to educate many of these lower propensity, first-time voters of Trump's actions when he was in office.

Trump's family separation policy was the most concerning of his first-term actions (66% concerned), followed by his role in overturning Roe (65%), and attempting to repeal the Affordable Care Act (63%). Indeed, if Democrats are to rebut Trump's immigration attacks and make his "mass deportation" promise a salient message, it will be crucial to highlight the most barbaric actions that he took at the border during his presidency.

Trump's family separation policy was the most concerning first-term action to young voters, followed by his role in overturning Roe.

Q: I'm going to read you some statements about things Donald Trump did during his presidency. After each, please tell me if it raises very serious concerns, serious concerns, minor concerns, or no real concerns in your own mind about Donald Trump.

Trump First-Term Action	All 18-29 Total serious concerns	All 18-29 Very serious concerns	Lib Dems	Mod/Cons Dems	Ind	Rep	White	Hispanic	Black	Double haters	2020 Biden voters	RFK Jr voters	Israel-Gaza voters
Family separation	66%	44%	97%	80%	68%	29%	57%	76%	78%	80%	86%	68%	73%
Abortion/Supreme Court Justices	65%	48%	94%	81%	69%	25%	58%	71%	73%	84%	86%	74%	82%
Healthcare repeal	63%	41%	94%	79%	62%	26%	58%	63%	78%	76%	83%	60%	77%
Pandemic	62%	44%	94%	80%	63%	23%	54%	70%	80%	75%	84%	62%	73%
Overturning 2020 election	60%	40%	96%	75%	63%	19%	55%	69%	76%	78%	84%	56%	70%
Wealthy tax cut	60%	37%	92%	75%	61%	22%	52%	70%	69%	75%	82%	54%	68%
Muslim ban	59%	38%	91%	72%	62%	20%	52%	65%	72%	72%	78%	54%	69%
Neo-Nazis	59%	40%	94%	73%	61%	23%	51%	70%	67%	73%	82%	59%	71%
Climate	55%	35%	94%	69%	55%	18%	47%	66%	61%	74%	78%	54%	68%

Source: Third Way/GBAO Nationwide Poll: n=1,500 LVs 18-to-29-years-old; MoE +/-2.5%; fielded May 9 to May 19, 2024.



Importantly, 48% of young voters were “very seriously concerned” with Trump’s appointment of three conservative Supreme Court Justices who overturned *Roe v. Wade* and his comment that women who have an abortion should be punished. This highlights both the continued salience of abortion and a growing relevance of the Supreme Court to young voters, which is sure to be a central message in the campaign.

Conclusion

Vice President Harris faces a challenging election ahead, and it’s clear that shoring up young voters is a crucial component to Democrats’ path to victory. Some will advise a turn to far-left policies in order to win back young voters, but the data does not support that strategy. A plurality of young voters are moderates and view the Democratic Party as more liberal than them—a turn towards more lefty policies in place of addressing what Democrats are doing on the economy would be an ill-advised playbook.

If Vice President Harris is to successfully sell her agenda, then she will have to remind young voters about the Biden-Harris administration’s most salient accomplishments: expanding healthcare, building infrastructure, and protecting abortion. Harris will additionally have to contrast the Biden-Harris administration’s accomplishments with Trump’s, as young swing voters are indeed more likely to cast their ballot for Democrats after this contrast is made. Keeping the anti-Trump coalition together requires an all-of-the-above strategy, but it’s crucial to differentiate what the most salient messages to winning an election are versus what is simply pandering to one’s base.

Note

- GBAO found that found that text-to-web (TTW) increases our ability to contact difficult-to-reach audiences, particularly lower-turnout, Republican-leaning voters. TTW was used as a way to correct for some of the non-response bias of past presidential election polling. GBAO started by weighting just the cell and TTW (voter file based) interviews using voter file data. Based on those results, weights were applied to the entire sample.
- In the two-way race, cell respondents were Biden+24 (close to 2020 results); TTW respondents were Trump+7; and online respondents were Biden+4.

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