

Young voters, abstainers, and unregistered: Generation Z turnout in Australia

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What did we do?

We examined the electoral behaviour in Australia of Generation Z (Gen-Z) citizens – a group which in some countries has turned out in greater numbers than Millennials and Generation X (Gen-X). Specifically, we asked: *When registration and voting are compulsory, what drives Gen-Z youths to register and vote, to register and not vote, or to not register at all? And how do they explain their choices?*

Given the importance of two steps – registration and casting a ballot – in Australian elections, we distinguished between **two types of non-voters**: 1) *abstainers* – those who are registered but do not vote; and 2) *unregistered* – those who do not register. We proposed that there should be a ‘**hierarchy of disengagement**’ among voters, abstainers, and unregistered. Consequently, we anticipated that abstainers would be less engaged than voters, but more engaged than the unregistered.

Based on the findings of previous research on youth political participation, the extent to which Gen-Z youths in a compulsory setting are willing to break the law and risk a financial penalty should depend on their socio-economic backgrounds; their political and societal engagement; and their political attitudes. We therefore tested three hypotheses:

H1: *Gen-Z youths with a higher socio-economic background are more likely to be voters than non-voters.*

H2: *Gen-Z youths with greater political and societal engagement are more likely to be voters than non-voters.*

H3: *Gen-Z youths with positive attitudes towards parties and democracy are more likely to be voters than non-voters.*

Finally, based on our ‘hierarchy of disengagement’, we tested the following:

H4: *Gen-Z youths with a higher socio-economic background, greater political and societal engagement, and positive attitudes towards parties and democracy are more likely to be abstainers than unregistered.*

How did we do it?

We fielded an online survey between 7 August and 28 December 2023. Our target population was citizens aged 19-27 at the time of the survey (meaning respondents were in the 18-26 Generation-Z bracket age when the May 2022 federal election was held). We received 1,366 responses, comprising 622 voters, 280 abstainers, and 464 unregistered. We oversampled non-voters to achieve sufficient respondents and better understand their characteristics and motivations.

To investigate the differences between Gen-Z voters and non-voters on the one hand, and between Gen-Z abstainers and unregistered on the other, we ran two binomial logistic regressions (one for each dependent variable) with robust standard errors.

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What did we find?

1. Gen-Z non-voters are distinguished by their unemployment status, lower political interest, and weaker faith in democracy. However, they are not more disengaged from their communities, and they do not hold more negative attitudes towards political parties than voters do.
2. The only significant differences between Gen-Z young people who abstain and those who do not register are that the latter are more likely to be students and better off economically.
3. Even a small financial deterrent like the \$20 AUD penalty for not voting in federal elections seems to have an impact. Almost half of those who voted say that the main reason they did so was to avoid being fined.
4. Information matters: around three in ten Gen-Z youths who did not register said this was either because they did not know they had to register or because they did not know how to do so.

Detailed results:

- Regarding **H1**, the relationship between unemployment and non-voting is strong and statistically significant: unemployed Gen-Z are 16 percentage points more likely not to have voted than those who were working full time. They are 8 percentage points more likely not to have done so than those who were working part time. However, being a student does not affect the likelihood of having voted or not; nor does the perceived economic well-being of one's family.²
- Regarding **H2**, we find mixed results. On the one hand, political interest is correlated with non-voting: the lower the level of political interest, the more likely someone is not to have voted. On the other hand, being a member of a civil society organisation is significantly and positively correlated with not having voted.
- Regarding **H3**, those who put '2' (on a 0-10 scale) for their agreement with the statement that 'democracy is the best system of government' are 21 percentage points more likely to be non-voters than those who put '8'. At the same time, our results show that young people who do not vote are no more disillusioned with parties than their counterparts who vote.
- Regarding **H4**, respondents' political and societal engagement and their attitudes towards parties and democracy do not distinguish abstainers from the unregistered. There are socio-economic differences, however, between the two groups: (1) being a student is positively correlated with not having registered; (2) perceived economic well-being is positively associated with not registering. For instance, respondents whose families make enough money to save are 16 per cent more likely to be unregistered than those whose families need help to meet living expenses.

While the results for H4 run contrary to our expectations, there is a potential explanation. In a compulsory setting like Australia, the unregistered person is not necessarily the most disengaged non-voter. Rather, they may be someone who rationally chooses not to register in order to lower their chances of being discovered.

Finally, we asked respondents to indicate the main reason for their (non-)participation at the 2022 federal election. We compiled a list of potential motivations (drawn from the literature on youth and voting) and asked respondents to rank the relevance of each from 0 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important).

² Of our socio-demographic controls, age is positively correlated with being a non-voter, although the relationship between the two variables is non-linear. Country of birth is also significantly correlated: the difference in the likelihood of having voted between native-born and foreign-born respondents is 9 percentage points (62 vs 53 percent). Gender and whether respondents are from a rural or urban area do not affect Gen-Z turnout.

Table 1. Most important reasons why young people voted in the 2022 Australian federal election.

	Frequency	Percent
I did not want to get fined	295	47.43
I thought that voting makes a difference	134	21.54
I thought it was my duty to vote	10	16.56
There was a party or candidate I wanted to vote for	68	10.93
I was interested in politics	22	3.54
Total	622	100

Table 2. Most important reasons why young people did not vote in the 2022 Australian federal election.

	Frequency	Percent
I was sick on election day	57	22.27
I was not interested in politics	48	18.75
I forgot	45	17.58
I thought that voting does not make a difference	34	13.28
There was no party or candidate I wanted to vote for	28	10.94
I did not care about getting fined	24	9.38
I did not think it was my duty to vote	20	7.81
Total	256	100

Table 3. Most important reasons why young people were not enrolled for the 2022 Australian federal election.

	Frequency	Percent
I was not interested in politics	106	22.84
There was no party or candidate I wanted to vote for	105	22.63
I did not know I had to enrol	82	17.67
I thought that voting does not make a difference	75	16.16
I did not know how to enrol	55	11.85
I did not think it was my duty to vote	41	8.84
Total	464	100

Main contributions

1. Our **typology of non-voters** (abstainers and unregistered) can be used in research and analysis on other countries, regardless of whether they have compulsory voting or not.
2. We provide one of the **most complete pictures to date of turnout among Gen-Z youth** anywhere, and certainly the most complete one of Gen-Z youth in a compulsory system.
3. **Information matters.** The fact that many of our survey respondents who did not register to vote admit this was due to ignorance is striking, especially in a country where the Electoral Commission has invested heavily over the past decade in efforts to raise youth turnout.
4. **Enforcing compulsory voting**, with relatively small financial penalties, **has a significant impact** on the decision of Gen-Z youths to turn out at elections.