



The Need for a New American Dream: How Young People Are Navigating a System That Wasn't Built for Them

Background

The Young People's Alliance (YPA) is a bipartisan youth-led advocacy organization, founded to empower young people to shape the future. Our members create a more pro-youth future through research, organizing, and advocacy. YPA mainly focuses on issues rooted in opportunity, affordability, and community (with AI at the intersection). Since our founding in 2020, we have built a membership base of over 2,400 members across 65 high schools, community colleges, and university campuses in six states.

Introduction

The American Dream feels like a broken promise for many young people. An affordability crisis makes rent and homeownership unattainable; automation and AI threatens to erase [15 percent of the global workforce by 2030](#) (primarily entry level jobs), and the [loneliness gap among young Americans is growing](#) as communities and third spaces continue to decline. Meanwhile, neither major political party has prioritized these challenges. As a result, trust in government among young Americans has [fallen to historic lows](#).

The purpose of this report is to create data that truly reflects young people's attitudes towards pertinent issues that are often misrepresented in mainstream media narratives. Workforce readiness, higher education reform, the eroding sense of community, and how unattainable goals like buying a house feels are some topline issues explored in this report. The findings will contribute to the existing evidence of the impacts these issues will have from the perspective of the group it will affect the most, youth.

Sample and Methodology

YPA held listening sessions at 22 high school and college campuses across three states: Michigan, North Carolina and California. The listening sessions were held in small groups, where a moderator asked questions and then recorded students' responses. The open-ended

nature of the questions meant that students could share several perspectives which is why some percentages below may add to over 100% as responses were not mutually exclusive.

The listening session responses represent ~210 students between the ages of 14-22 across 5 high schools, 13 public universities, and 2 private universities . Two variations of questions were split between the campuses to ensure that more data could be collected for deeper analysis. The questions were divided into three sections based on YPA's focus areas: opportunity, affordability and community. The responses were then transferred into a spreadsheet by YPA's Research and Policy Director before being synthesized to create this report. Since respondents addressed multiple themes within their answers, the percentages below were calculated based on the total number of mentions (or the frequency) of a particular theme across all responses. The following sections detail the questions asked, which are written in italics, and a summary of the responses.

Topline Findings:

When asked what role AI should play in their lives, young people embraced AI's efficiency in basic tasks but emphasized the importance of AI not taking on human-centered roles, such as an emotional companion, caretaker, or creative.

- 52% of responses mentioned the value of AI for basic tasks, while 18% spoke against AI companions, 12% against AI in the care economy, and 11% against AI in the creative industry. No responses supported AI being used in those roles. Opinions were mixed on academic uses of AI.

When presented with the problem of mass automation of jobs, young people overwhelmingly prioritize skills-based training and laws to preserve jobs. Only 16% of students proposed universal basic income as a solution, and students noted the importance of work as a source of dignity, purpose, or social stability in the age of AI.

- When presented with options on ways society could respond to AI automation of jobs, 35% of students supported skills-based training (almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of this subgroup specifically mentioned the importance of AI-resilient skills). 23% wanted no AI in any job or field while 29% specifically noted having AI free industries. 16% agreed with having UBI. Young people want to show the value they bring to the workplace instead of resorting to UBI which takes away the opportunity of having meaningful careers.

Erosion of community: Students are hyper-aware of their reliance on technology and voiced their desires to connect more with people they know in person

- 42% expressed concern about their own or their friend's dependency on technology.
- 55% said they would decrease their reliance on technology. Some suggested that they would limit their online connections to only people they know, become more

involved in their local communities and spend less time on social media apps and instead communicate more in-person.

Gen Z values affordability over geopolitical dominance and entertainment

- When asked to prioritize a range of issues, students ranked housing affordability, being able to afford a stable livelihood, and living in a society where your identity, dignity, and/or values are respected as the highest. The US winning the AI race against China, having better entertainment technology and getting more value in our tax system were ranked as least important.

Young people applied to an average of 25 jobs/internships before securing a position. This struggle fuels the disillusionment amongst Gen Z because they believe that luck and connections outweigh effort and qualifications as little is being done to provide economic opportunities and ensure fair hiring.

- There was a strong correlation between concerns about getting a job and concerns about affordability. 62% of responses referenced both in their answers, implying that barriers to employment intensifies young people's anxieties about financial instability.

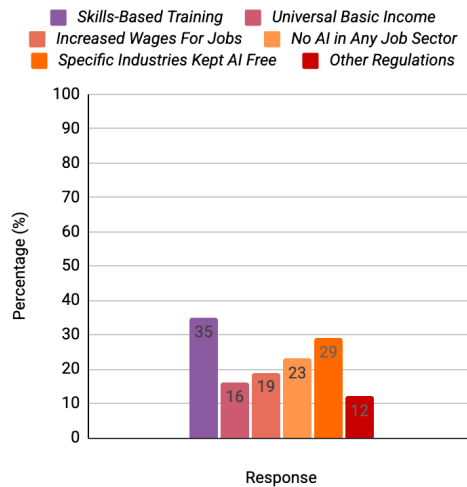
Young People on Jobs and Education

Prompt: Many researchers think that a large portion of entry-level jobs will be automated in the next few years. If this happens, describe what you would ideally want in the economy of the future?

Here are some ideas to get you thinking:

- *Skills-based training programs*
- *A universal basic income where everyone would receive a check to cover their basic needs*
- *More compensation (money) for different types of jobs*
- *Requiring certain jobs to be done by humans and not by AI to preserve opportunities for people to work*

Young People's Responses to AI Automation of Jobs



Companies such as McKinsey and ADP and CEOs like Jim Farley (Ford) and Dario Amodei (Anthropic) have predicted that AI will cause mass job automation. In a [video](#) recently published by YPA, Gen Z's expressed their concerns towards AI automating entry-level jobs particularly, given that they typically involve fewer complex tasks that require years of experience. Postings for entry-level jobs are already down 35% from January 2023 [according to Revelio Labs](#). If this trend continues, it will become even more challenging for young people to establish a career post-high school as career pathways and training opportunities become more limited.

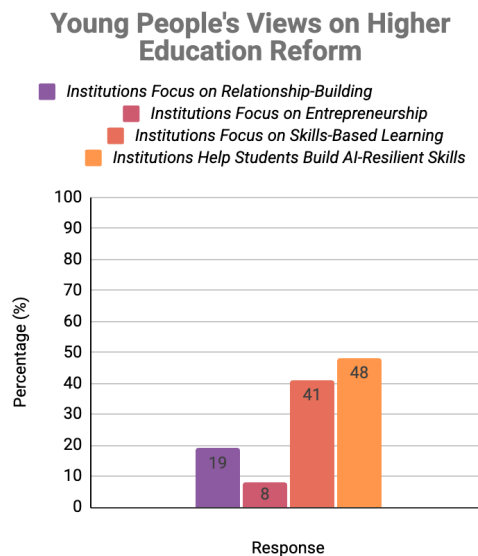
Out of the ideas that were listed in the prompt, 35% of responses suggested skills-based training as a response to AI automation. Of this subgroup, 72% specifically mentioned the importance of building AI-resilient skills so they can remain marketable to employers. 19% of responses brought up increasing wages for different job industries. Students proposed that the money saved from automating jobs should be used to increase the wages of careers that are typically underpaid like teaching because they **“are doing important work for not enough money” / “should have better benefits offered for lower-paying jobs, not just high-paying”**.

16% advocated for UBI as a resource to provide additional security in the event of job automation: **“it is a necessary component as AI outcompetes certain skillsets and closes entire job industries” / “having UBI would make us value rest and not overworking”**. A point was also made that UBI should not take away from an opportunity to have a purposeful job: **“I would support a UBI, but I think it should go with meaningful careers”**. Yet 4% of responses regarded UBI as an infeasible option with one student stating that it **“takes away from the American work ethic”**.

Respondents then narrowed their responses to grapple with AI disrupting industry-specific sectors. Only one student, who made up 2% of respondents, had a more favorable outlook on AI, stating that AI **“would replace jobs that were not difficult anyways”**. In comparison, 23% of responses said there should be no use of AI in any job or sector but 29% were a bit more lenient- not urging for a complete ban but preferred for there to be specific AI-free industries. These included the creative fields, interpersonal roles like therapy and social work and entry-level positions. Similarly, 12% of responses accepted AI’s use conditionally but pointed out the need for other regulations such as having humans cross-check any work involving AI to ensure errors would not be made or using government or universities as decision-making bodies for the types of jobs AI can and cannot do.

Prompt: Similarly, some researchers are concerned that the traditional college model will not fully prepare students for work in the age of AI and will not be economically viable for many people when training is needed. What do you want the higher-education (education after high school) of the future to look like

- *University-style institutions focus on growing as a person and building relationships rather than academics.*
- *Colleges focus on entrepreneurship*
- *Higher education replaced with skills-based training*



With the future of workforce development looking uncertain, young people are actively rethinking how to best set themselves up for success. For some, this meant re-evaluating the traditional college model and assessing whether it fully prepares students for entry into the modern workforce.

Skills-based training was the leading reform option, mentioned in 41% of responses, which is consistent with previous answers around economic opportunity. The consensus was that skills preparation would provide an easier transition into a changing workforce and help set students up for success better. In the words of one student, skills-based training gives **“students the experience they need to successfully enter the workforce through easier access to internships and other experiences that prepare a student for their career”**. Another student remarked that hands-on-experience **“prepares the students for the future careers that they will be doing”**. A third said **“to be fully equipped to go into this new work force, we need to have more hands-on learning with experience”**.

19% of responses sided with university-style institutions existing in their current form but emphasizing relationship-building and networking opportunities more. Respondents believed that higher education should advance student’s networking abilities due to the importance of “who you know” in securing opportunities. This suggests that young people view leveraging skills and connections as a critical tool in creating economic opportunities for themselves. This, however, opens questions to the future value of traditional four-year degrees- particularly the worth of certifications if students are more concerned about practical abilities and building a network over accreditations.

While we are in an entrepreneurial golden age, only 8% of responses viewed higher education as a forum to develop entrepreneurial ambitions. Respondents who mentioned this option envisioned institutions to **“function more like innovation hubs, encouraging students to start projects or businesses with mentorship and support”** / or have **“application centered education— like creating a product, or running a business, applicable skills that mirror what you want to accomplish in your life”**.

AI was brought up outside of the discussions around reforms. 48% of respondents in this question reiterated similar messaging to responses from past questions around building AI-resilient skills. Though the full extent of how AI will impact the future of workforce development remains to be seen, young people do not want to feel ill-equipped to navigate this impending disruption.

The current model of higher education is already starting to be deemed as outdated by students who have shown an appetite for reform. This report could therefore be used to legitimize institutional changes, preparing students for the modern-day world and workforce where young

people have built a strong network, had adaptable skills and felt confident in entering the workforce.

Young People on Community and Purpose

Prompt: From a scale from 1-10, how connected do you feel with your community? What do you think is missing from your community?

On average, from a scale of 1-10, young people rated their connection to their communities as a 7. Students who reported a strong connection listed school culture, joining clubs and hometown communities as factors that strengthened their connections.

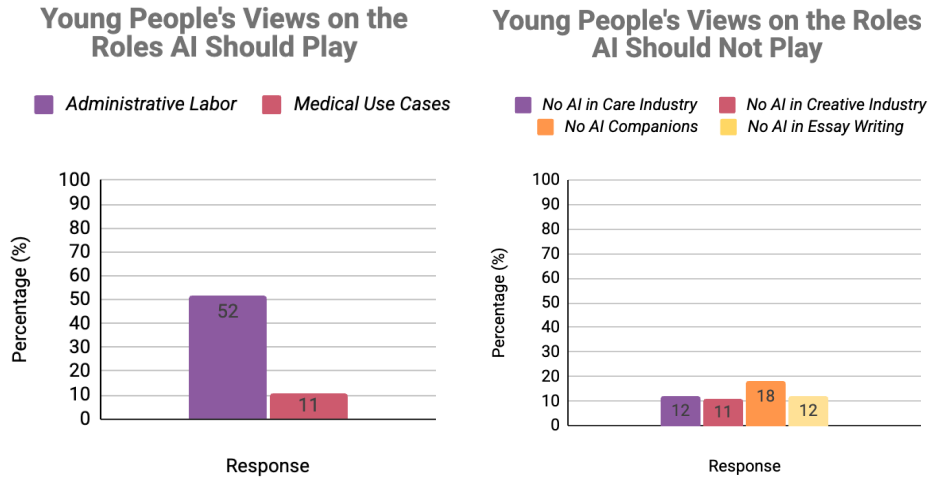
Social dynamics was a significant factor in people's determination of their sense of community. 8% of responses noted that cliques, competition culture and a lack of collaboration contributed to their feeling not being as involved in spaces. This sentiment was shared by students who rated their connections high as well as those who rated it low, suggesting that it is a shared experience amongst young people: **“College communities still feel like they want us fighting each other for the best grade or mentorship” / “people are practically living in entirely different worlds and thought bubbles”**. Being a minority on school campuses (whether it was identifying as part of a different heritage, racial or ethnic group, or being a transfer student) was another factor that 7% of respondents noted, defining it as **“isolating”** and **“harder to get involved”**.

9% of responses mentioned excessive phone use and social media as a particular challenge in forming strong communities. Some students felt like people may be more comfortable reaching out through text rather than in person and can use social media as a crutch which limits human interactions. One respondent observed that **“people do not have conversations with strangers”**. The student continued to say that they **“miss true connection and not needing to fit into a social media box”**.

Even for responses that rated their connection a 7 and above, there was a desire by 19% to have more third spaces and community gatherings to strengthen involvement. Students said that they **“crave real spaces where young people can come together without needing to spend money or compete”**. This presents an opportunity for schools and governments to foster more intentional gatherings within their communities as the data shows that young people want to increase their human connection.

Prompt: As AI becomes a bigger part of our lives, we need to decide what we do and don't want to replace. What kinds of roles do you think AI should be allowed to play in our lives? Here are some examples of roles AI could play:

- *AI could be your accountant, truck driver, author of books you read, artist, nurse, therapist, mentor, or even friend and significant other.*



AI usage has become more frequent in everyday life, penetrating all aspects of society. [78% of organizations used AI in 2024](#) and [62% of US adults](#) interact with AI at least several times a week. Young people shared their views on the kind of roles they think AI should and should not be allowed to play, using the examples from the prompt to guide the type of positions AI could hold.

52% of respondents were comfortable with AI being used for administrative labor like accounting, coding, data summaries and study resources. 11% supported AI being used in specific medical use cases: notetaking for doctors, helping people with disabilities, driving drug research and preserving human life). When it came to discussions of the role of AI in more human-centered roles and academia, respondents were more apprehensive.

12% of all respondents specifically noted for AI not to replace any jobs in the care industry (such as a support worker or a nursing assistant). 11% pointed out that AI should not replace creative jobs such as artists and authors because they were **“uniquely human roles that should be AI-free”** as one student remarked.

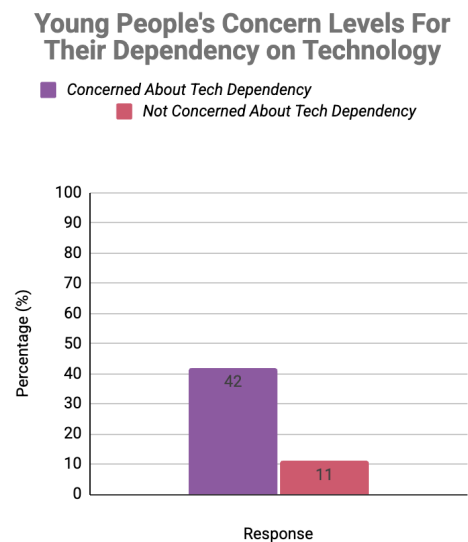
Transitioning to AI’s role in relationships, 18% of responses said that AI should not be an alternative to friends, mentors or significant others. A separate 11% of responses felt like there should be restrictions on AI companion use for minors. Two responses cited that AI companions create **“unhealthy attachments”** and that could **“harm emotional growth or blur the line between real relationships and artificial ones”**. Respondents also expressed

concerns with how AI could negatively impact mental and social development. One student cautioned that **“we do not want a culture that values a program over human interaction”** and another said that **“AI companies should be held accountable for how their tools affect mental health and learning”**.

In the academic sector, 12% preferred for AI to not be used for essay writing. There was a spectrum of comfort where on the one hand, one student suggested that AI should be banned in all educational settings until high school or university. On the other hand, another student advocated for AI use so educators can teach students how to use it to build up their writing. A third opinion laid somewhere in the middle, as the student believed that AI was okay if it did not replace teachers. These convey the nuances in approaches young people have towards regulation of AI in education, exposing the tensions between preparing students for a world with AI while trying not to undermine teachers and the value of human learning.

Prompt: Are you concerned about you and your friends' dependency on AI and the future of technology and social media? Why/Why not?

Prompt: If you could, how would you change your relationship with technology (social media, AI)? What is your ideal relationship with technology?



The next part of the listening sessions challenged respondents to reflect introspectively about their own habits relating to social media and AI. 42% of responses expressed concern about dependency on technology (either their own or their friend’s) in comparison to 11% who were not concerned. In a separate prompt, 55% of respondents said that they wanted to decrease their reliance on technology. Four responses gave candid admissions of ways they became dependent

on AI: asking AI basic questions multiple times a day, using AI to text a significant other, cheating on tests with AI and using AI to write emails.

Respondents commented on factors they believed to have influenced their unhealthy uses of technology and AI. Arguably, big tech companies **“Clearly reward manufactured rage bait and a complete emphasis on monetization”**, as an attempt to **“reinforce the mindsets of media consumers by targeting them”** which is a reference to the use of algorithms. Respondents worried about technology becoming more unsafe due to privacy, violence and adult content exposure as well as the rise of deepfakes blurring the notions of reality. Perhaps this is why 45% of responses wanted to change their social media habits. There was an inclination to spend less time on social media apps, limit online connections to only people they know or use social media for networking and entertainment purposes only.

To answer another prompt on what the future of AI will look like in technology, respondents imagined existential extremes such as AI surpassing human intelligence and achieving **“singularity”**, or AI becoming ungovernable which is an indicator of how powerless young people already feel. One student warned that **“the outsourcing of basic tasks spells a dire future for people's attention span”**. Another expressed that **“people are becoming too reliant on AI to guide them in all aspects of life”** and that it is becoming **“very dystopian”**.

This data could be a wake-up call to users of technology, prompting them to reflect on how much control they have over the different platforms they use. For tech companies, the warnings given by young people could foster discussions around ethical use of AI and technology, where younger generations- aka the prime users- are at the forefront of the decision-making process.

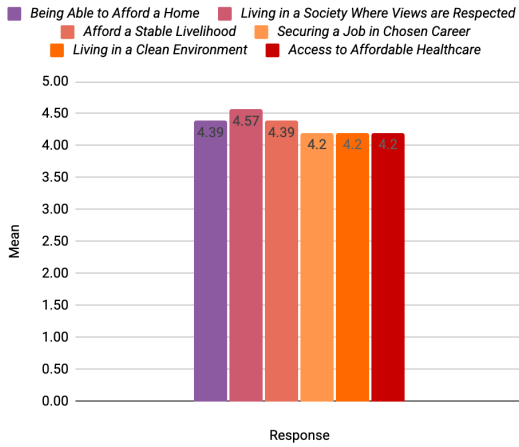
Young People's Priorities

Prompt: Please mark the following issues based on how pressing they are in your life with 5 being very pressing and 1 being not pressing at all

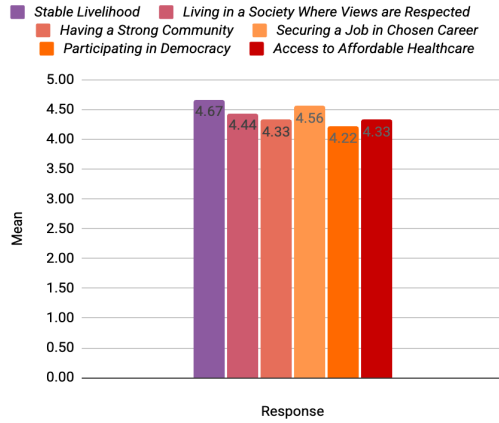
- *Getting an internship/job/career in your chosen field* ____
- *Eventually being able to afford a home* ____
- *Being able to afford a stable livelihood* ____
- *Having a strong community or family* ____
- *The US winning the AI race against China* ____
- *Living in a clean and sustainable environment* ____
- *Being able to access and afford healthcare* ____
- *The government not censoring people based on their views* ____

- *Being able to actively participate in elections and democracy* ____
- *Having more value in our tax system* ____
- *Living in a country with a fair immigration system* ____
- *Living in a society where your identity, dignity, and/or values are respected* ____
- *Better entertainment technology (such as social media, AI companions)* ____

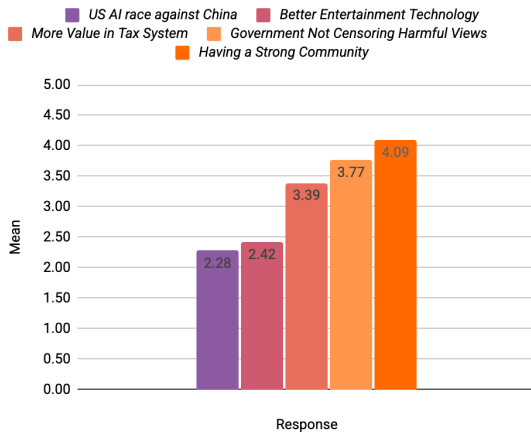
Young People in California's Most Pressing Issues



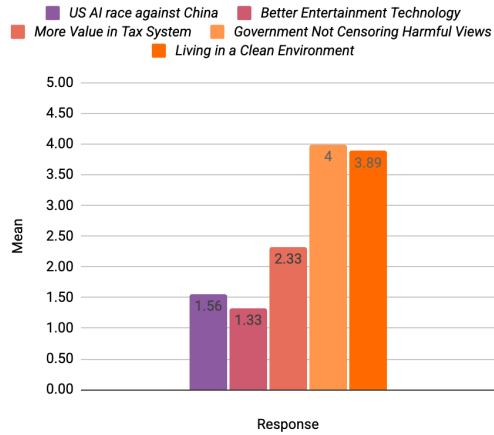
Young People in North Carolina's Most Pressing Issues



Young People in California's Least Pressing Issues



Young People in North Carolina's Least Pressing Issues



Respondents were asked to weigh present-day priorities, between 1 and 5 least to most important. This was to assess whether their views were because of specific contexts, or even how the questions were framed in the listening sessions, or if they were truly pressing issues that they would like to see addressed.

The topmost pressing issues were eventually being able to afford a home, living in a society where your identity, dignity, and/or values are respected and being able to afford a stable livelihood and getting an internship/job/career in your chosen field. In contrast, the US winning

the AI race against China, having a better entertainment system, and more value in our tax system were marked least important.

One possible reason why earning an income was so important for young people may be their focus on family and community which were both cited by 13% of responses. The need for a balanced lifestyle with happiness at the core was a recurring theme with many respondents stating that they wanted to live a **“happy” “exciting” “peaceful”** life, being able to retire their parents or own a house with a large family. Respondents also wanted to engage in more in-person interactions, **“not always being distracted by phones”** and trying to connect with friends and family more **“than with AI”**.

What this data reveals about young people is that they care more about traditional aspects of life (like affordability) that are associated with the idea of an American Dream, instead of technological and geopolitical ambitions that lawmakers and big tech companies are trying to advance. This was an interesting finding because when we enquired about how many jobs/internships students had to apply for before securing their most recent position, the average number was 25. The rise in competition and the use of AI in screening applications makes it harder for young people to stand out. This had respondents feeling pessimistic about job prospects, believing that **“luck outweighs effort”**, **“only the rich will be successful”** and that **“personal recommendations feel like a necessity”**.

Prompt: What do you want your life to look like? Are you concerned about being able to achieve this life?

To conclude the listening sessions, young people shared what they want the future of their lives to look like. 62% of responses touched on the link between employment and affordability. The thought of insufficient income was not tied to any specific job. Rather, respondents pointed out that not only has securing employment become harder, but the rising costs of everyday living has shifted priorities to finding jobs that pay more than what is needed to cover basic necessities. The current economy was described as **“difficult to succeed”** and students were concerned about accumulating debt. One respondent shared that they were **“terrified of becoming bankrupt from a health condition or needing to pick between medication and rent each year”**, underscoring how out of reach everyday affordability has become.

Despite the challenges, young people were committed to taking care of their families and their wider communities which made up 13% of responses each. 6% of responses saw education as a tool to land them a well-paying and stable job and career aspirations ranged from specific roles such as lawyer, forensic psychologist, doctor, to broader goals like wanting **“a good job**

where I can make an impact” and “working hard to get a good job without AI taking over everything”.

Implications for Policymakers

There is a disconnect between young people’s priorities and the priorities of lawmakers that needs to be urgently addressed. Young people value affordability, where they thrive in a society where their values are respected, over geopolitical competition and keeping up to date with the latest entertainment technology. This divergence may be why lawmakers struggle to connect with young people; Gen Z are increasingly becoming more apathetic because the current political system is not working to meet their top concerns. This report could be used as a guiding tool for lawmakers to shift their attention to appeal to youth voters, recognizing that the political priorities of younger generations are changing to focus on restoring young people’s American Dream.

Another major implication of this report is that it defines the role young people want AI to have in an age of increased usage and policy. Despite being left out of the decision-making process, young people have strong views towards the integration of AI in places of work, academia and their personal lives which reflects their levels of comfortability. Young people are determined to become more AI resilient and see skills-based training as an avenue to maintain their autonomy and competitive edge. There is greater acceptance of AI replacing tedious jobs like housework or accounting, and it can be used as an aid in schools- like many are already doing. However, young people draw clear boundaries around AI in human-facing roles like the care and creative sectors, and they place a strong importance on academic integrity as they were against AI being used to cheat in schools. Finally, young people feel strongly about AI being limited for children, especially regarding AI companions. This information should inform stakeholders of how they can better equip young people for an AI world, and prompt reflection on where and how AI should be used in society.

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