



The New Landscape of Youth Attitudes Toward Sustainability and Social Justice: Engaged, Concerned, but Constrained, Disempowered, and Increasingly Resigned

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Methodology Snapshot

The Laudato Si' Office of Sustainability & Social Justice at Sacred Heart University (Fairfield, CT) in partnership with GreatBlue Research (Glastonbury, CT) developed and conducted this survey to surface the perceptions of United States youth on the intertwined topics of sustainability and social justice, the role of higher education in these areas, as well as trends in institutional trust, civic engagement, and freedom of expression that may further inform these perceptions. We surveyed a random sample of 1,500 U.S. residents aged 15 to 29. The sample was stratified by gender, age and geographic region to ensure broad representation. The final sample was then weighted according to age, education, gender, race/ethnicity and U.S. census region. The survey was fielded from March 5, 2026, to March 12, 2026.

Details of the methodology can be found at the [end of this report](#). Poll questions and response frequencies are available by request — please contact Marylena Mantas-Kourounis, Ph.D. by email at: kourounise@sacredheart.edu.

Executive Summary

This report describes the current landscape of U.S. youth attitudes on matters of sustainability and social justice, as well patterns related to civic participation, self-expression, and institutional trust. We find that young people are not disengaged; rather, they are concerned and attentive, but their engagement is tempered in intensity, channeled into lower-effort actions, and increasingly located outside traditional civic institutions.

On climate change, a clear majority of young people express concern, yet this concern lacks urgency. While roughly two-thirds report being worried, far fewer describe themselves as very worried, and the share expressing the highest levels of concern has not grown in the past year. A similar pattern appears in attitudes toward sustainability: it is widely viewed as important, but fewer youth express strong, unequivocal commitment. This pattern is mirrored in emotional responses. Youth reactions to climate change are overwhelmingly negative, with anxiety, frustration, and fear far outpacing hope. Yet even here, there are signs of moderation: self-reported eco-anxiety has declined slightly compared to the previous year. This points not to disengagement, but to a shift from acute emotional intensity toward a more subdued, possibly fatigued form of concern.

Large majorities of youth identify critical thinking and collaboration as necessary in resolving matters of sustainability and social justice. However, this awareness does not seamlessly translate into action. A growing share of youth report lower confidence in their ability to act and a declining sense of personal responsibility compared to previous years. Lack of efficacy is coupled with an overwhelming support for colleges and universities to teach about sustainability and social justice, as well as the skills required to act on sustainability and social justice. Higher education emerges as one of the most trusted institutions to effectively address matters of sustainability and social justice, although to a lesser extent than in previous years. Young people understand what matters, but feel less equipped to do something about it and call on higher education to help bridge the capacity gap.

This gap is further compounded at the level of expression. A majority of youth report holding back their opinions at least occasionally, with very few indicating they never self-censor. Concerns about negative consequences—alongside persistent fears of judgment—are high.

At the same time, the information and trust environment in which youth operate is deeply fragmented. Social media has become the dominant channel through which young people encounter information, far surpassing traditional sources. Yet trust does not align with exposure. Instead, trust remains rooted in personal relationships—family and friends—while trust in social media as a platform is notably lower and declining. Perhaps, even more significant is the continued erosion of trust in institutions, including higher education and nonprofits, but with the lowest levels of trust reserved for government, corporations, and wealthy elites. Youth are most active in informal, interest-based communities—such as hobby groups, sports, and other social

activities—while engagement in traditional civic and institutional organizations remains comparatively low.

Taken together, these findings challenge narratives of youth apathy. Instead, they point to a more nuanced reality: young people in the United States are not disengaged, but their engagement is being reshaped by gaps in confidence and perceived efficacy, caution in expression, and declining trust in formal institutions. Together, these dynamics point to a reconfiguration—not a retreat—of civic and social participation. Understanding this evolving landscape requires shifting the analytical focus from whether or not youth participate, to how, where, and under what constraints they choose to engage.

Our key takeaways include:

Most Young People Worry About Climate Change and Sustainability and Social Justice, but Few Feel Urgent Concern

A majority of young people express concern about climate change, but the intensity of that concern remains limited and has not deepened over time.

- 68.5% say they are worried about climate change, including 27.9% who are very worried, while 28.5% say they are not very or not at all worried
- A similar pattern holds for sustainability overall: 62.9% say it is very or extremely important, but only 29.2% say it is extremely important; down from 2025 (31.5%)

Anxiety and Frustration Lead Youth Climate Emotions

Emotional responses to climate change skew heavily negative, with anxiety and frustration outpacing optimism, even as the intensity of “eco-anxiety” softens slightly.

- 39.1% say climate change makes them feel anxious, followed by frustration (30.9%) and fear (26.1%)
- Conversely, just 21.3% say they feel hopeful
- Self-reported eco-anxiety has declined year-over-year (55.1% from 63.1% in 2025), suggesting concern remains widespread but less acute

From Awareness to Action: Youth Care about Climate Change, Sustainability and Social Justice, but Don’t Feel Ready to Act

U.S. youth recognize the importance of a wide range of skills and capacities, but fewer feel confident in their ability to act; highlighting a gap between awareness and action.

- Majorities say key capacities like thinking (81.6%) and collaborating (81.5%) are important
- However, only 61.5% feel confident in their ability to act (down from 68.7% in 2025), and 65.0% feel a strong personal responsibility (down from 71.2% in 2025).
- This gap suggests that capability, not just motivation, may be a barrier to deeper engagement

Youth Believe that Colleges & Universities Are Part of the Solution

- 7 in 10 believe that colleges and universities should teach about sustainability and social justice, as well as actions related to sustainability and social justice
- Although trust in institutions to address sustainability and social justice has declined across the board, including higher education (60.0% vs. 66.6% in 2025) and nonprofits (57.4% vs. 65.8%), youth ranked higher education as the most trusted institution to address these matters

Youth Civic Engagement Grows More Passive and More Digital

The U.S. youth report engaging with civic and social issues, but participation is concentrated in lower-effort, digitally mediated actions rather than more active forms of involvement.

- 40.5% plan to complete online issue surveys, while 29.5% plan to sign petitions and/or 24.4% plan to follow candidates on social media (from 34.2% and 28.6% in 2025, respectively)
- Fewer plan to attend protests (17.8%) or volunteer for campaigns (11.0%) – both also down from 2025 (26.4% and 15.8%, respectively).
- Even fewer plan to run for office (7.8%) and notably, 24.1% say they will not take any of these actions

Youth Receive Most Information from Social Media, but Trust Remains Rooted in Personal Networks

While social media dominates how young people receive information, trust remains rooted in personal relationships, and institutional trust continues to erode.

- Social media, both broadly (67.6%) and through specific people they follow (50.0%), is the dominant source of information; outpacing family, friends, and traditional news sources. However, trust follows a different rank order, with family (71.7%) and friends (70.8%) ranking highest, followed by people they follow on social media (60.8%), while trust in social media overall remains notably lower (52.7% down from 61.3% in 2025).
- Trust is lowest in government, corporations, and wealthy individuals

It's Not Apathy, It's Caution: Why Youth Increasingly Self-Censor

A large majority of young people report holding back their opinions at least occasionally, reflecting growing caution around public expression.

- 77.9% say they have held back their opinions at some point
- Just 16.6% say they have never held back
- Concerns about negative consequences have increased sharply (42.2% from 26.5% in 2025), alongside persistent fears of judgment (41.4%)

Youth Engagement is Concentrated in Informal Communities Rather than Civic Institutions

Participation patterns show that the U.S. youth are more engaged in informal, interest-based communities than in traditional civic or institutional structures.

- Highest participation is in hobby-based groups (29.2%) and sports or outdoor activities (23.7%)
- Participation in civic or institutional groups is lower, including political groups (10.2%), professional associations (10.9%), and labor unions (8.4%)

Motivation to Act is Personal and Community-Driven—Not Political

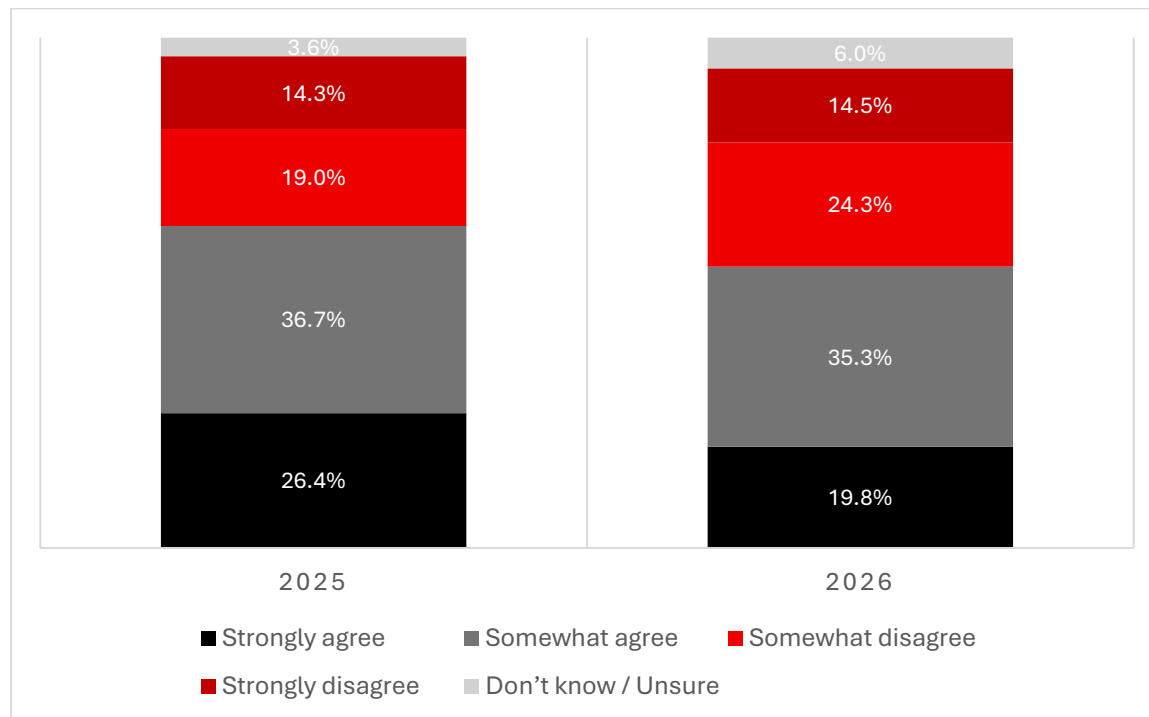
When asked what would motivate action, U.S. youth point primarily to personal and community-based factors rather than political ideology.

- 47.6% cite personal experiences and 44.3% cite community well-being
- 36.9% are motivated by concern for future generations
- Fewer cite political positions or stances (25.2% from 30.7% in 2025) or media exposure (30.1% from 36.9% in 2025)

Major Findings

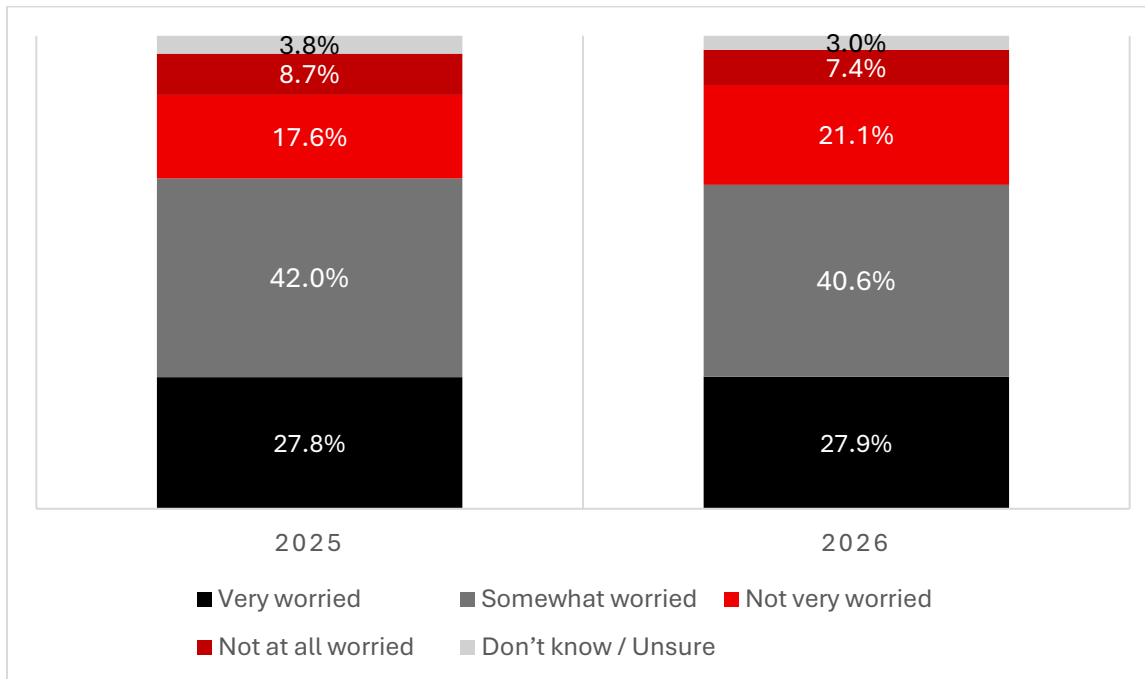
Most Young People Worry About Climate Change and Sustainability and Social Justice, but Few Feel Urgent Concern

Climate concern is widespread among U.S. youth, but the climate experience is defined by anxiety, not intensity. Experience of eco-anxiety has decreased year-over-year (55.1% in 2026 vs. 63.1% in 2025) among U.S. youth, with fewer strongly agreeing and more shifting into moderate agreement and disagreement, suggesting a less top-of-mind but still prevalent sense of climate-related distress.

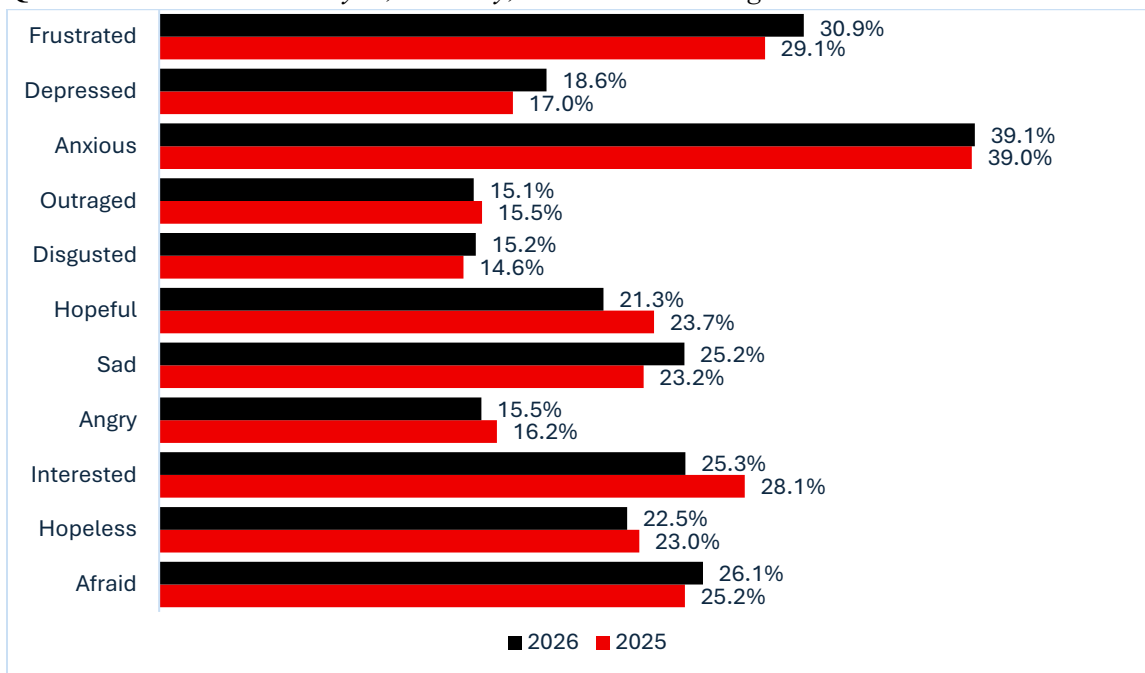


Question: *Thinking specifically about climate change, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I experience “eco-anxiety” (my level of concern for climate change causes psychological distress that impacts my daily life)*

Concern about climate change remains high and stable year-over-year (68.5% in 2026 vs. 69.8% in 2025), with most respondents continuing to report being worried, while emotional responses are led by anxiety and frustration rather than hopefulness.

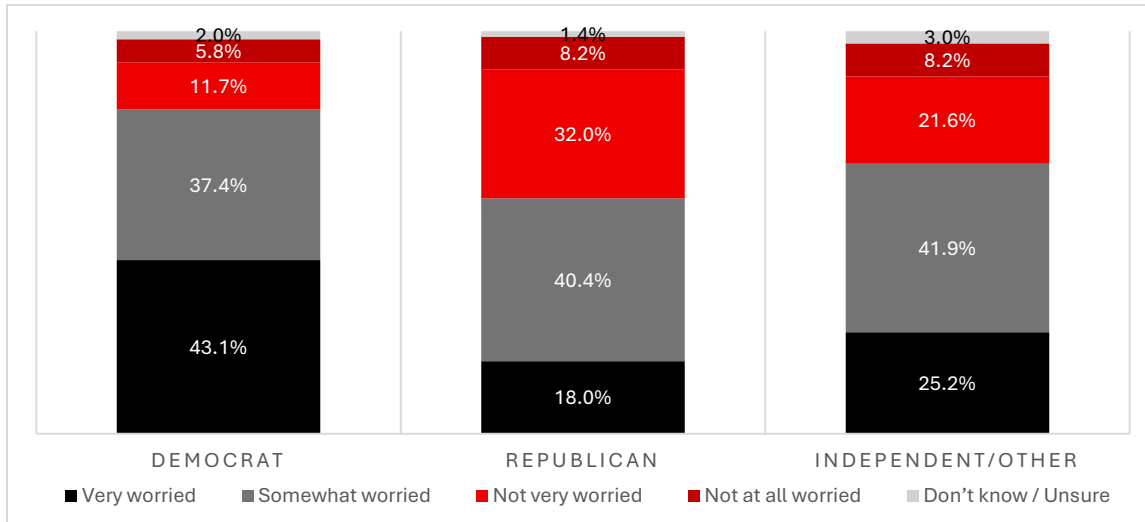


Question: *How worried are you, currently, about climate change?*

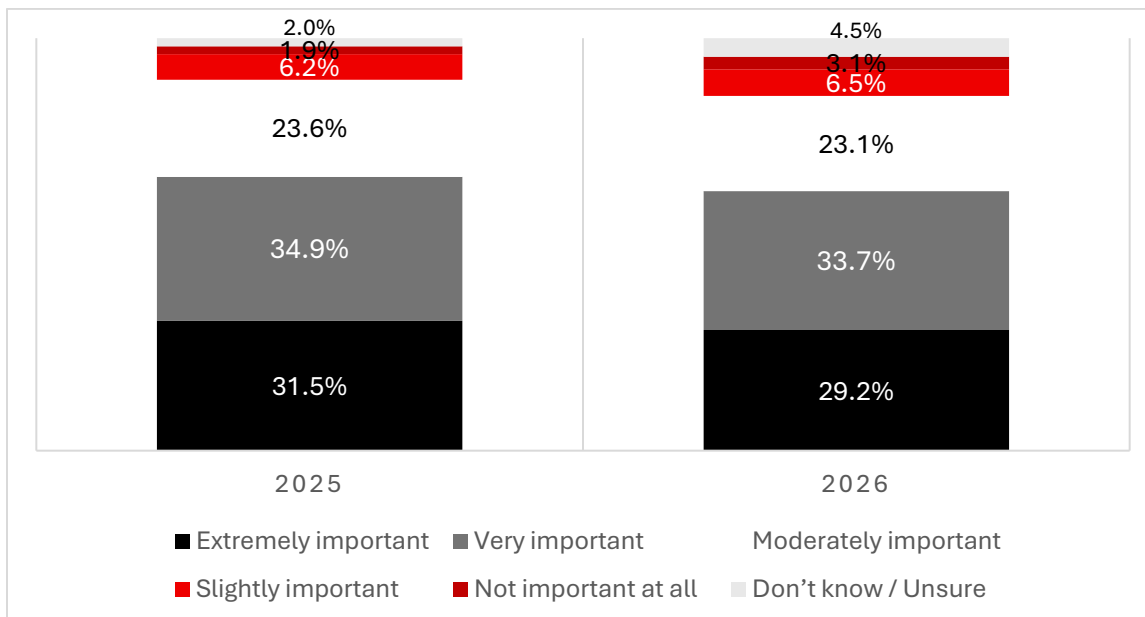


Question: Which, if any, of the following emotions do you feel or experience when you think about climate change? Please select all that apply

Intensity of concern is shaped by politics, as Republicans (18.0%) and Independents (25.2%) are less likely than Democrats to be “very worried” about climate change (43.1%).



A strong majority continue to view sustainability as important, overall (62.9%), but sentiment has weakened, with fewer rating it as extremely important (29.2%, down from 31.5%).

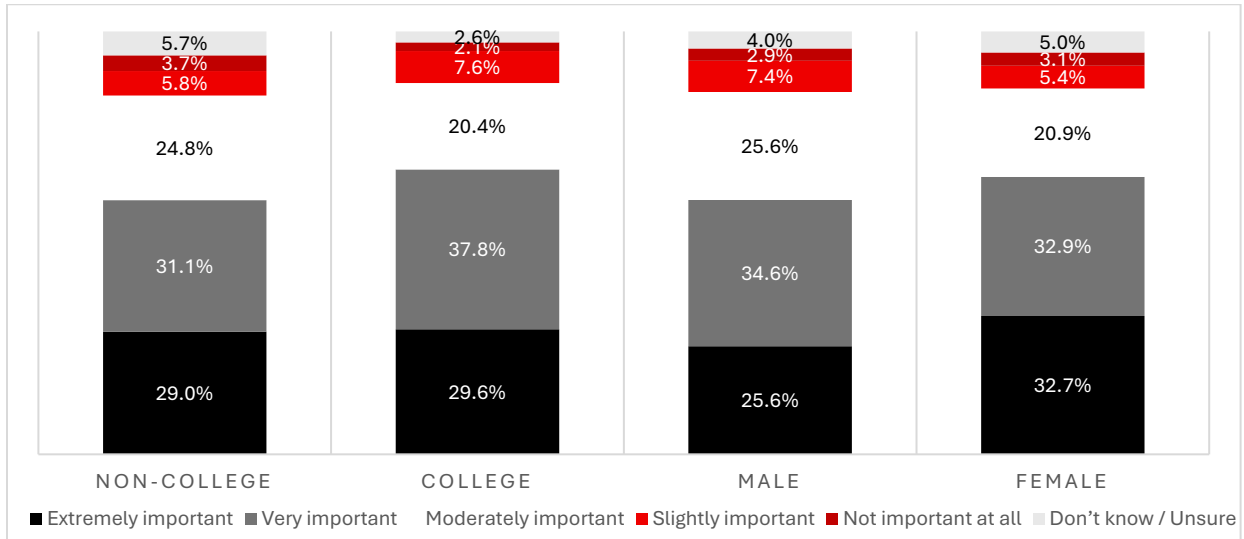


Question: Based on the definition of sustainability above, how important would you say addressing sustainability and social justice is to you? (definitions below):

- **For the purposes of this survey, sustainability is defined as an approach to social justice that recognizes the deep connections between human well-being, economic life, and care**

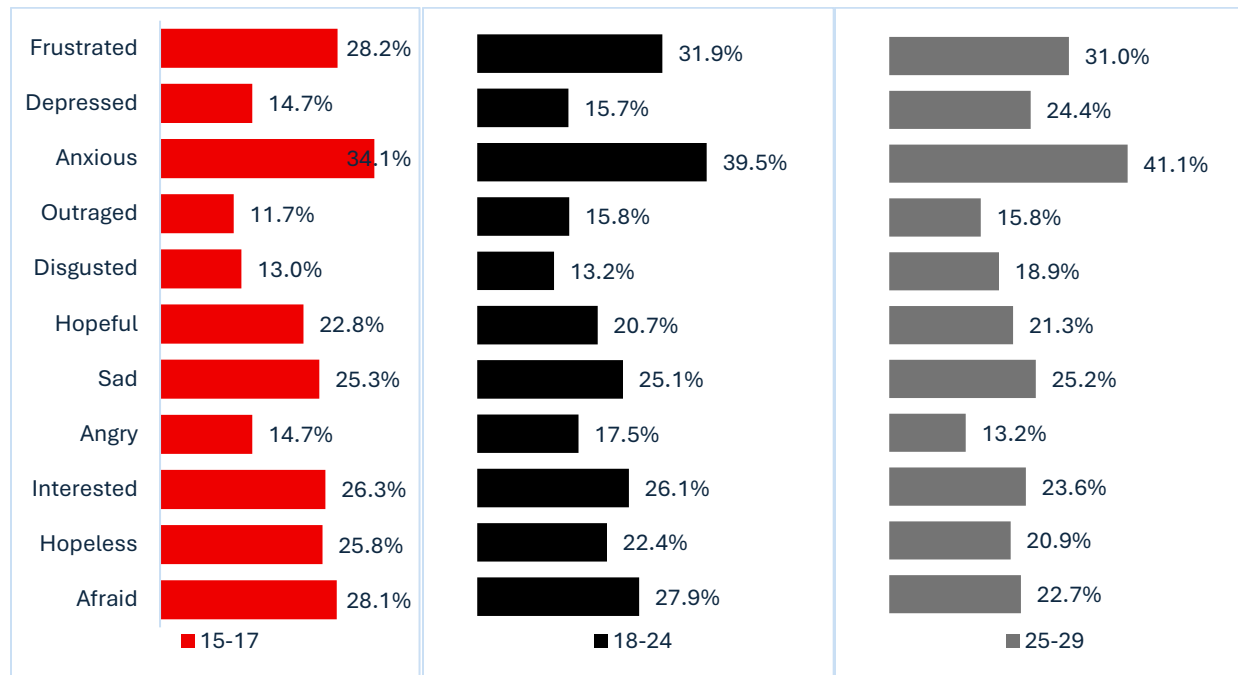
for the environment. Sustainability cannot be separated from social justice, as environmental, economic, and social challenges are deeply intertwined. It encompasses efforts to end poverty, protect the planet, ensure prosperity for all, reduce inequalities, and foster peaceful and inclusive societies through collaborative global action.

However, unlike concern or anxiety specifically over climate change, the gaps in sentiment regarding sustainability are more driven by gender and educational attainment.



Anxiety and Frustration Lead Youth Climate Emotions

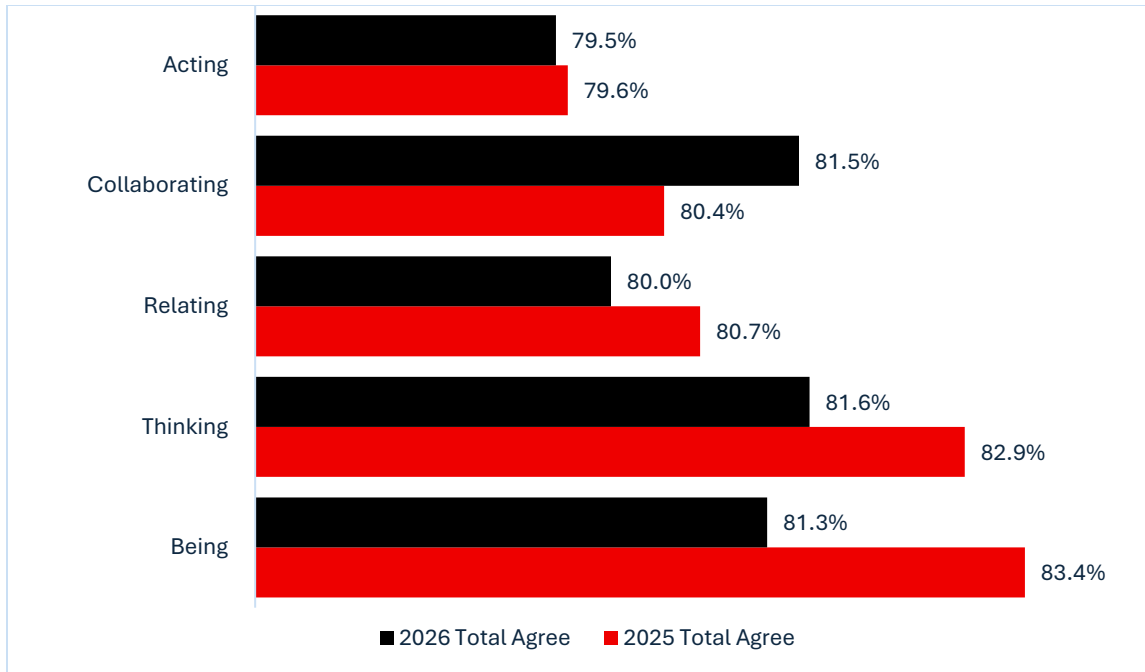
Emotional responses to climate change shift with age, with older youth (25–29) more likely to report anxiety (41.1% vs. 34.1% among ages 15–17), while younger respondents are more likely to feel hopeless (25.8% vs. 20.9%), suggesting that emerging younger cohorts may be entering the conversation with a greater sense of resignation than heightened concern.



Question: Which, if any, of the following emotions do you feel or experience when you think about climate change? Please select all that apply.

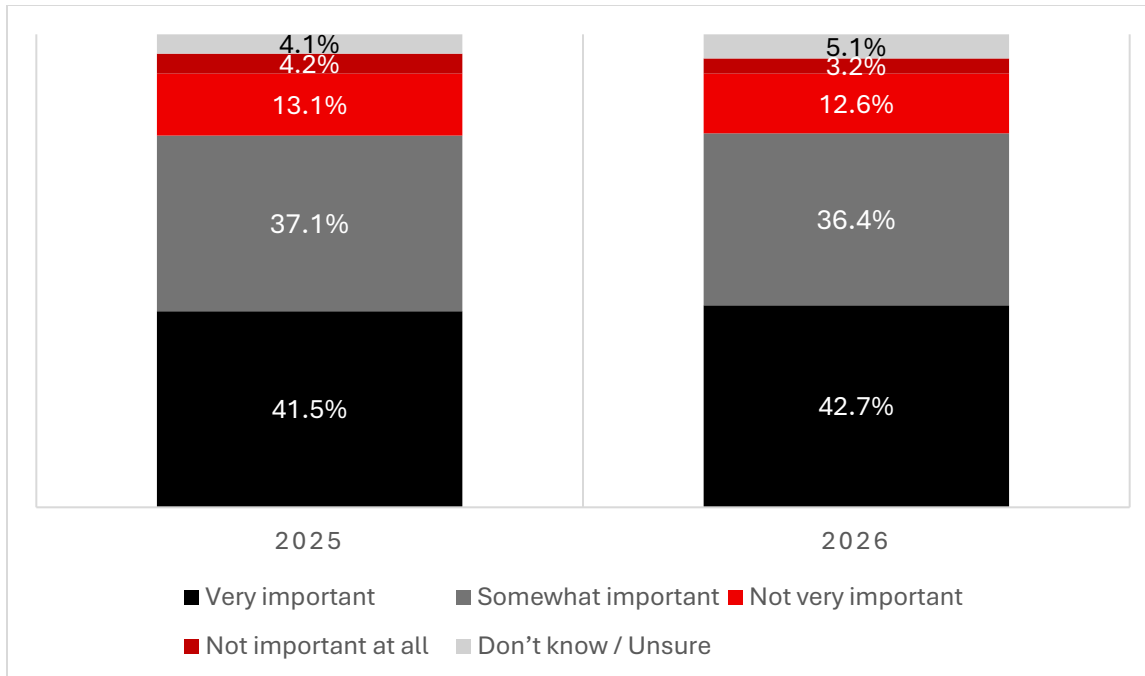
From Awareness to Action: Youth Care about Climate Change, Sustainability and Social Justice, but Don't Feel Ready to Act

While large majorities say key capacities like thinking (81.6%), collaborating (81.5%), and acting (79.5%) are important, fewer express confidence in their own ability to act (61.5%) or a strong sense of personal responsibility (65.0%), highlighting a gap between recognizing what is needed versus feeling prepared to engage.

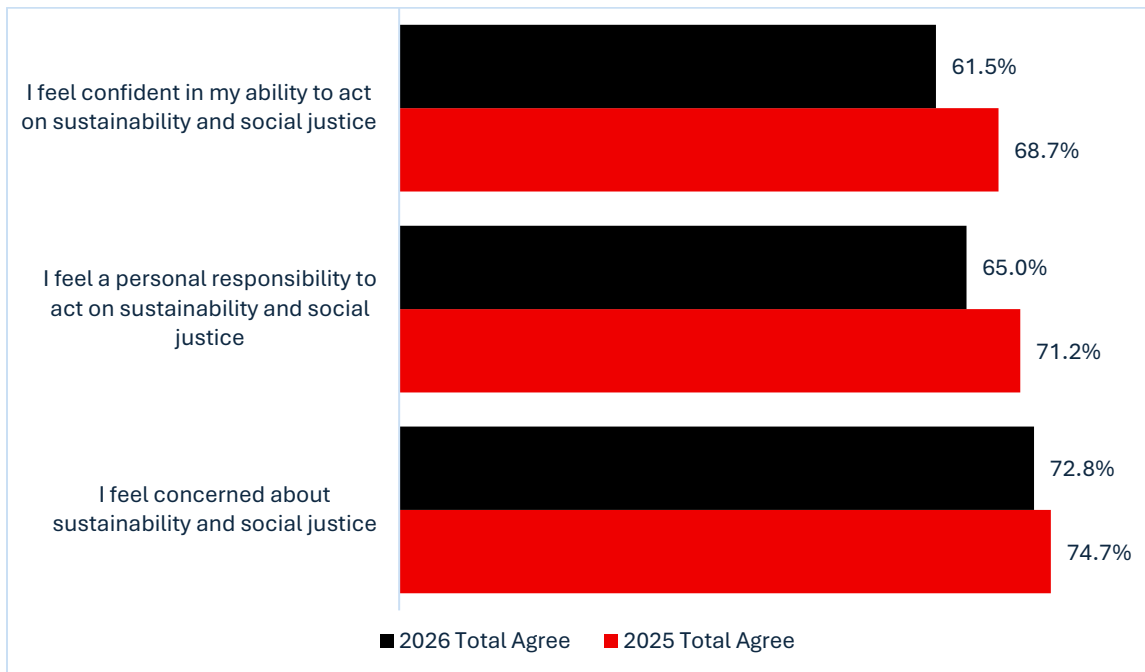


Question: *How important is having each of the following capacities for you to act effectively on issues you consider significant? (definitions below):*

- *Being (self-awareness, mindfulness, integrity, honesty, openness, curiosity, being present in the moment)*
- *Thinking (evaluation of information, awareness of differing viewpoints, seeing system complexity and patterns, long-term vision)*
- *Relating (caring for and feeling connected to other individuals & societies, future generations, nature)*
- *Collaborating (effective communication, listening, teamwork, embracing variety, trust, and the ability to motivate others)*
- *Acting (enabling change with courage, creativity, optimism and perseverance)*



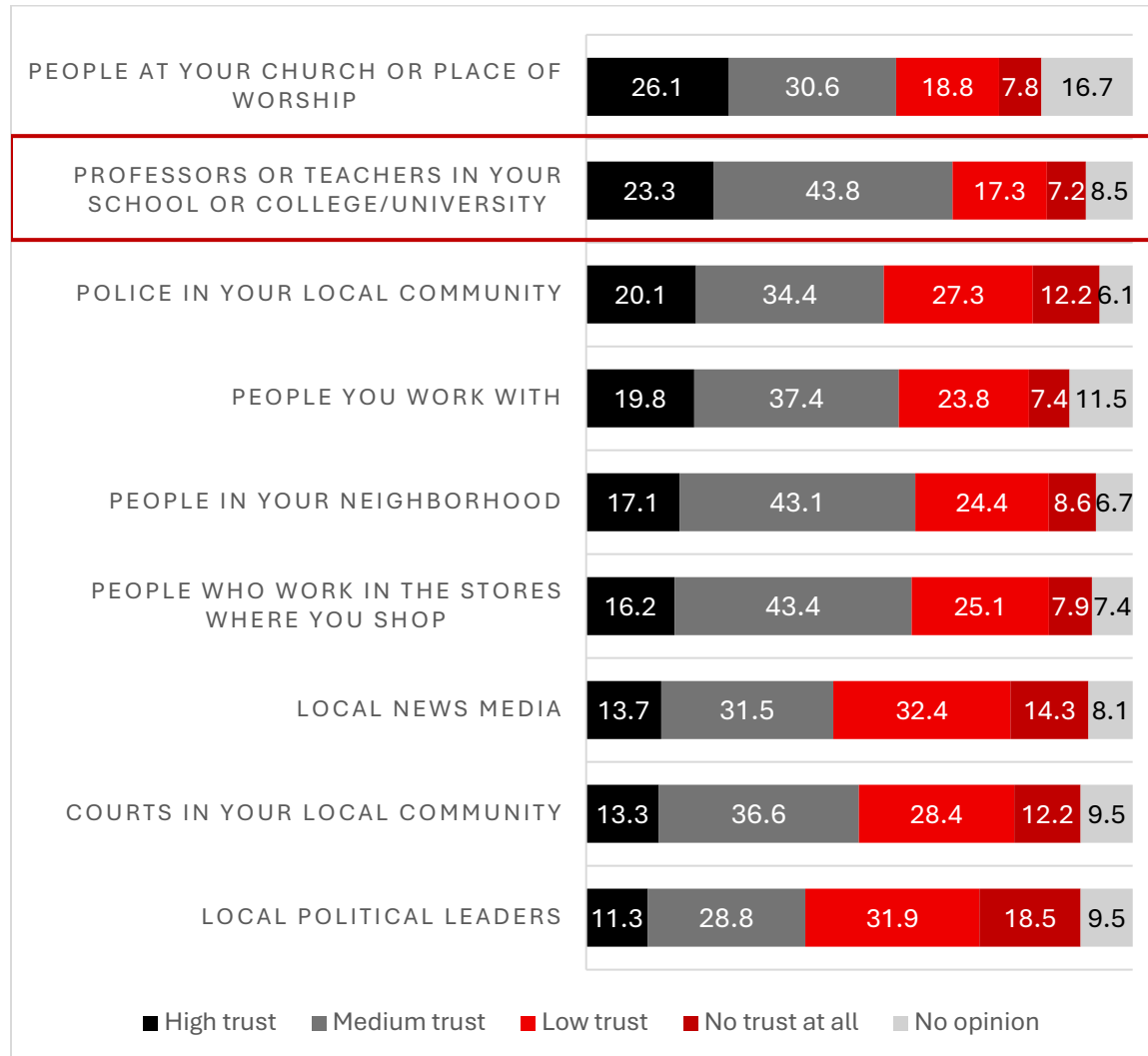
Question: *In the previous question, you identified the capacities that you think are important for acting on effectively on issues you consider significant. How important is it for colleges and universities to teach these capacities and skills?*



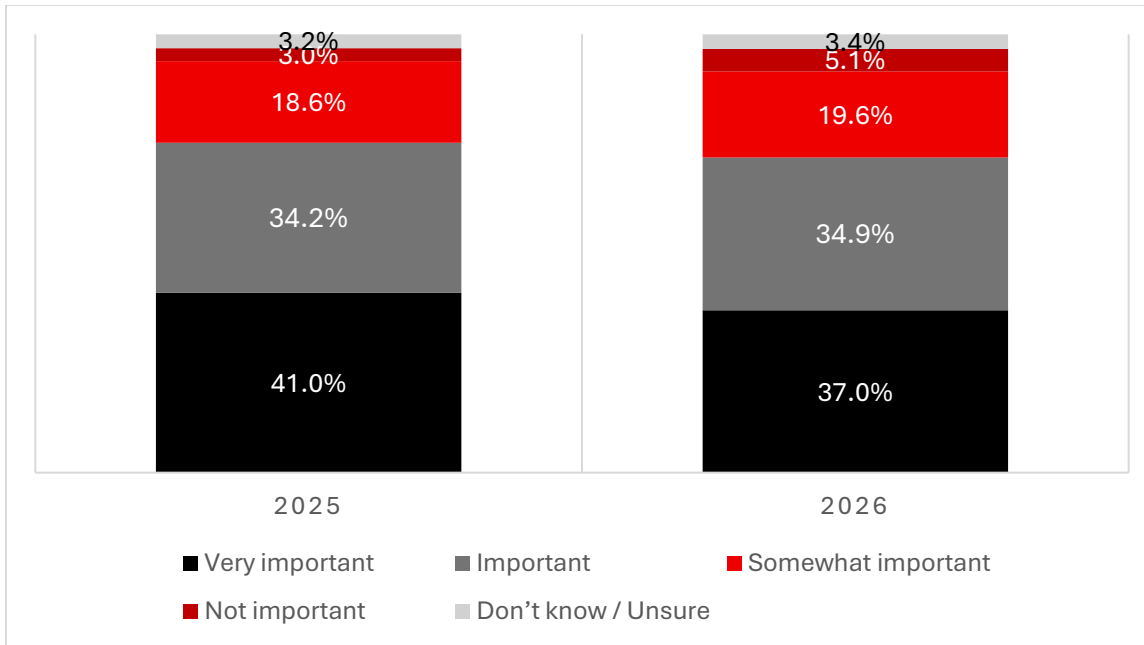
Question: *How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your personal feelings?*

Youth Believe that Colleges & Universities Are Part of the Solution

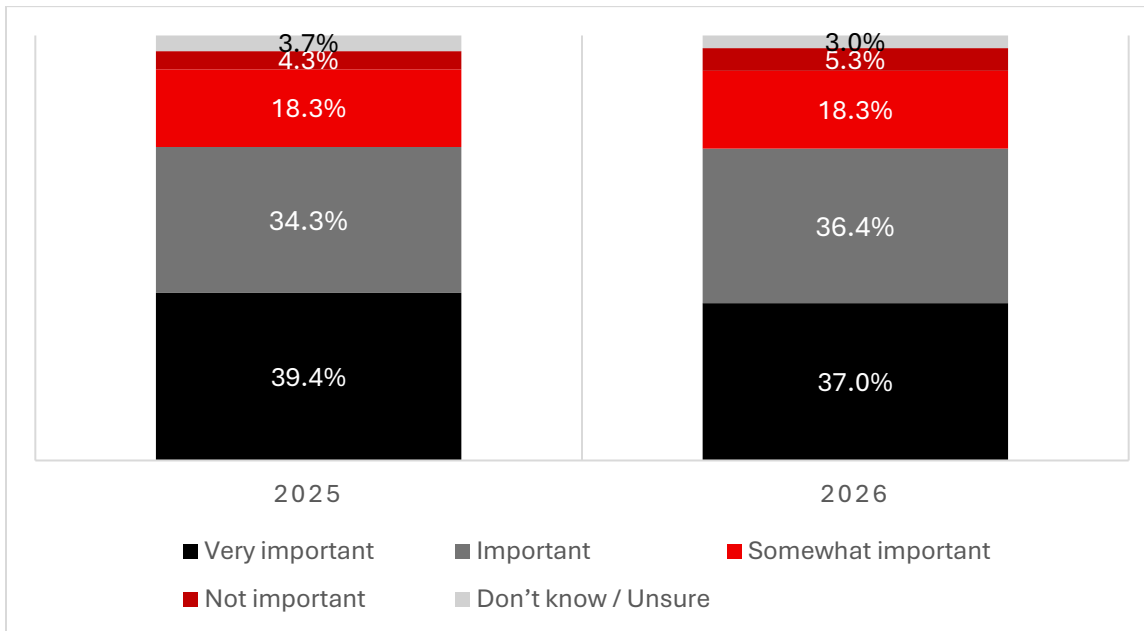
Professors and teachers emerge as one of the most trusted groups among young people (66.1%), reinforcing the influential role educators play in shaping perspectives. This trust is reflected in strong support for colleges and universities teaching about sustainability and social justice, with roughly 7-in-10 rating both general education (71.9%) and skill-building (73.4%) as important, although fewer now say these topics are “very important” (both at 37.0% in 2026).



Question: Please select the answer that best reflects how much trust you place in each of the following groups of people as appropriate:



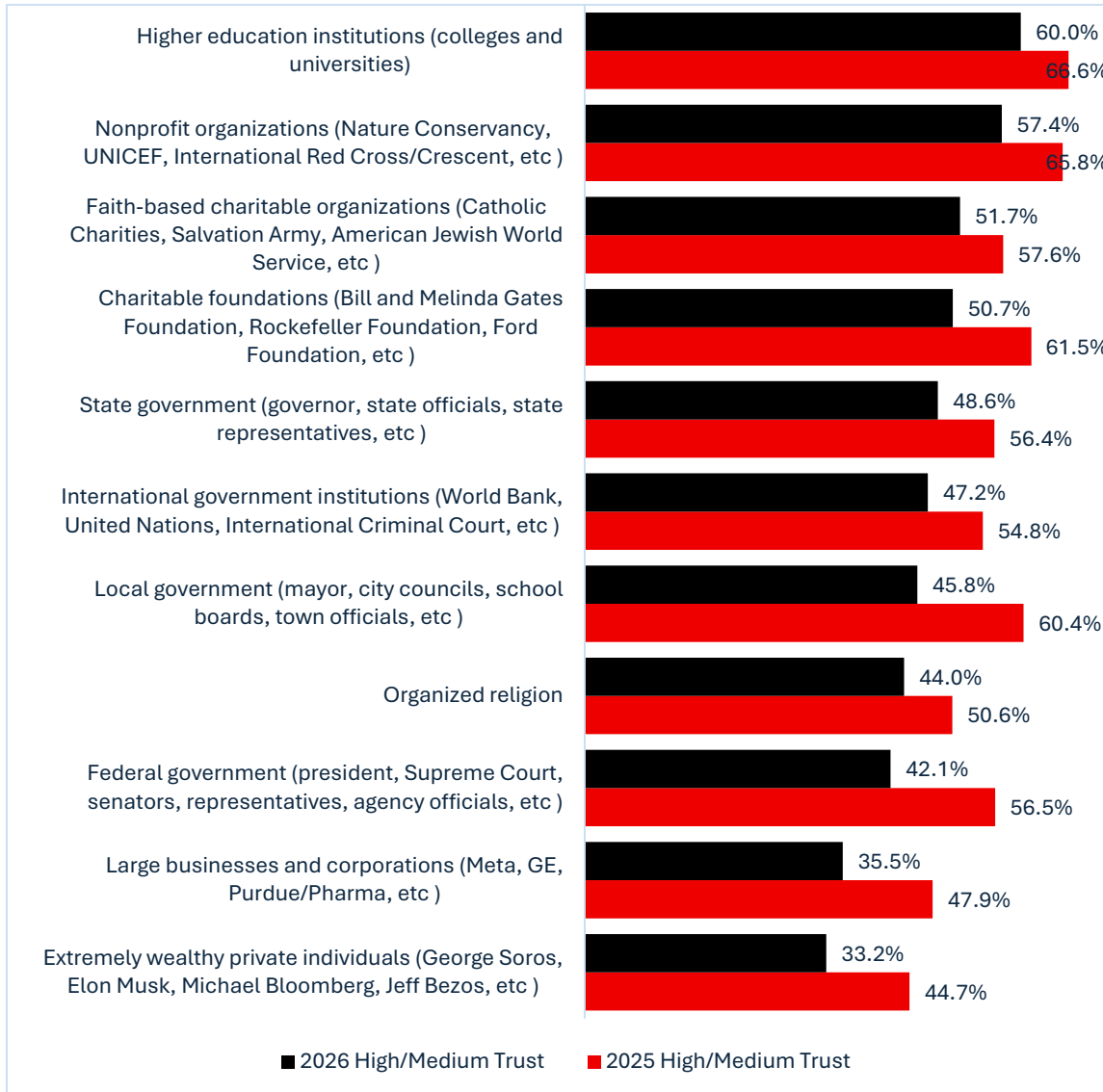
Question: *How important do you think it is for colleges and universities to teach about sustainability and social justice?*



Question: *How important do you think it is for colleges and universities to teach the skills required to take action on sustainability and social justice?*

Institutional Trust: Trust in Institutions to Act on Sustainability Declines Across the Board

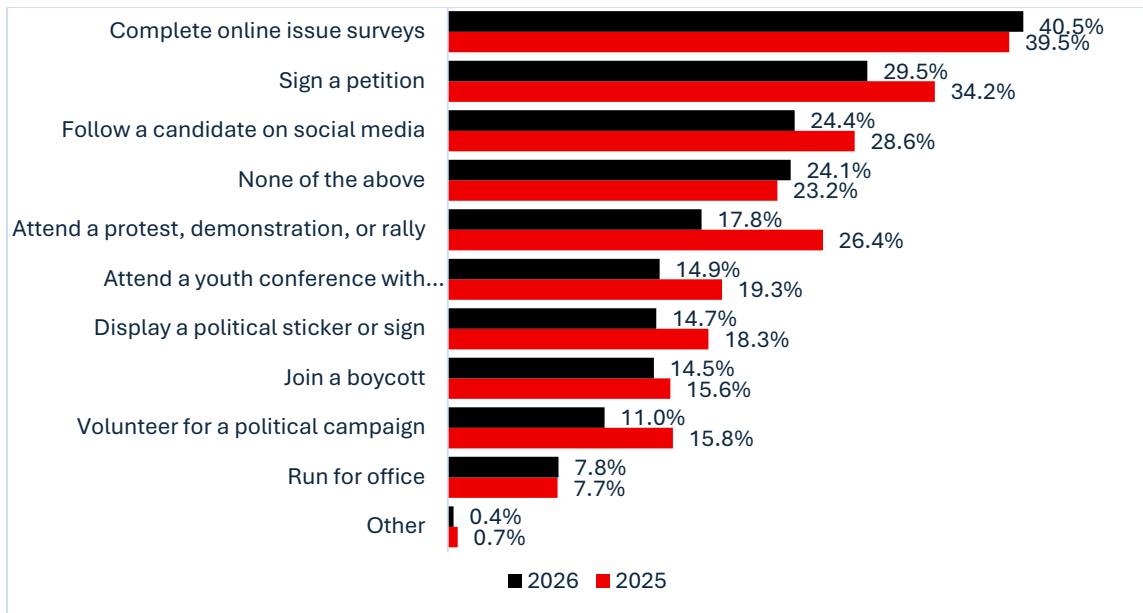
Trust in institutions to effectively address sustainability and social justice has declined across all groups in 2026, including higher education (60.0% vs. 66.6% in 2025) and nonprofits (57.4% vs. 65.8% in 2025), with even lower levels of trust in government(s) (42.1%–48.6%), corporations (35.5%), and wealthy individuals (33.2%).



Question: *What is your level of TRUST in the following institutions to effectively address sustainability and social justice?*

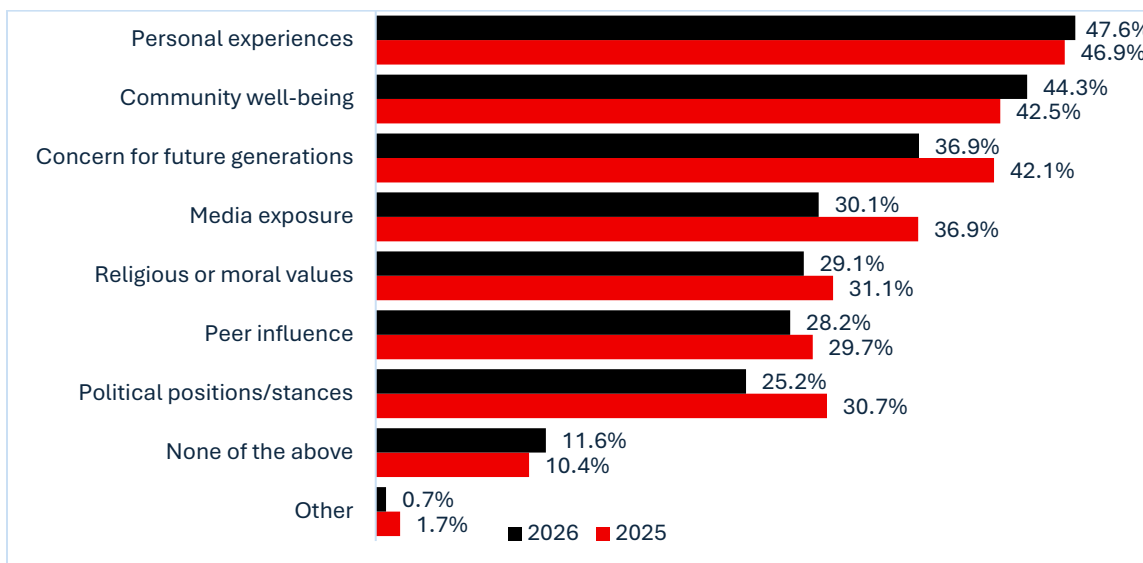
Youth Civic Engagement Grows More Passive and More Digital

Civic engagement is most also likely to take the form of lower-barrier, digital actions, such as completing online surveys (40.5%) and signing petitions (29.5%), while more active forms like attending protests (17.8%) or volunteering for campaigns (11.0%) remain less common.



Question: *Do you plan to take any of the following actions this year? Please select all that apply.*

Participation is primarily motivated by personal experiences (47.6%) and community well-being (44.3%) and is seen as requiring a broad set of skills, including critical thinking (35.8%) and collaboration (33.8%). They also show a keen awareness that the skills required for action on sustainability and social justice - critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork - are also apolitical.



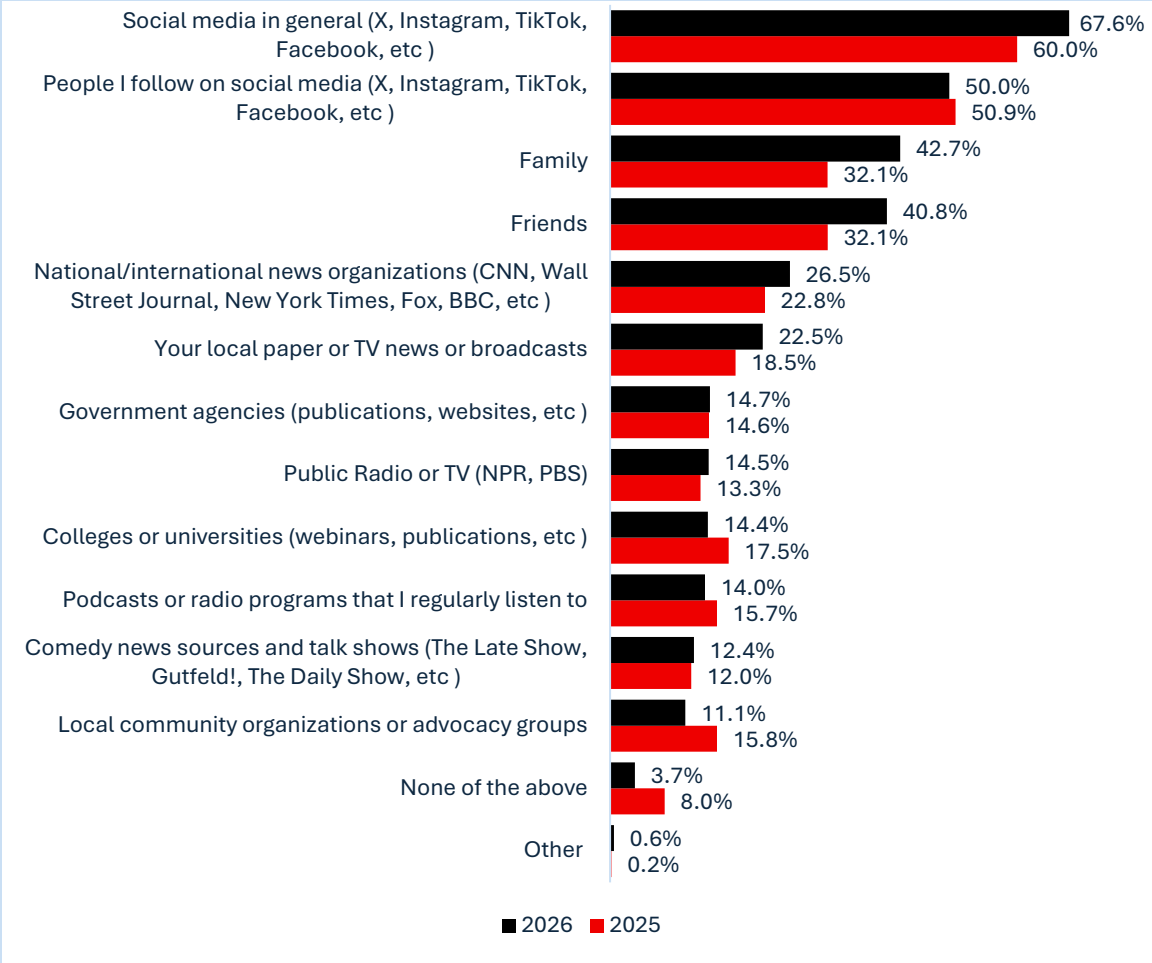
Question: *And what would motivate you to take these sorts of actions? Please select all that apply.*



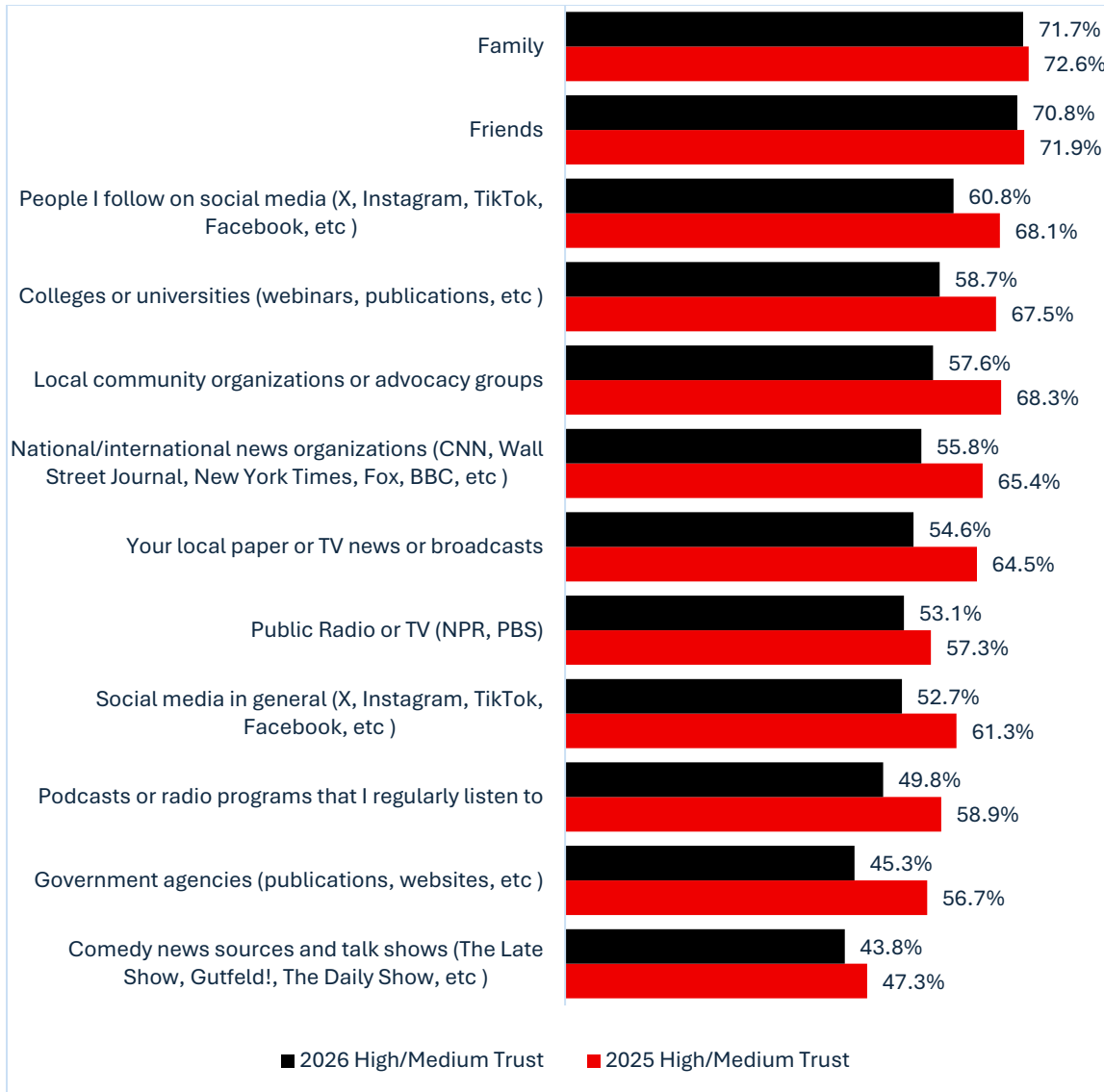
Question: *In the previous question, you mentioned actions you are interested in engaging in this year. What skills do you think are required to take those actions? Please select all that apply*

Youth Receive Most Information from Social Media, but Trust Remains Rooted in Personal Networks

Social media remains the dominant source of information (67.6%), growing in utilization since 2025 (60.0%), followed by specific people respondents follow online (50.0%); while traditional sources like national news (26.5%) and local media (22.5%) trail behind. However, trust is highest in personal networks, such as family (71.7%) and friends (70.8%), but comparatively lower for social media overall (52.7%)



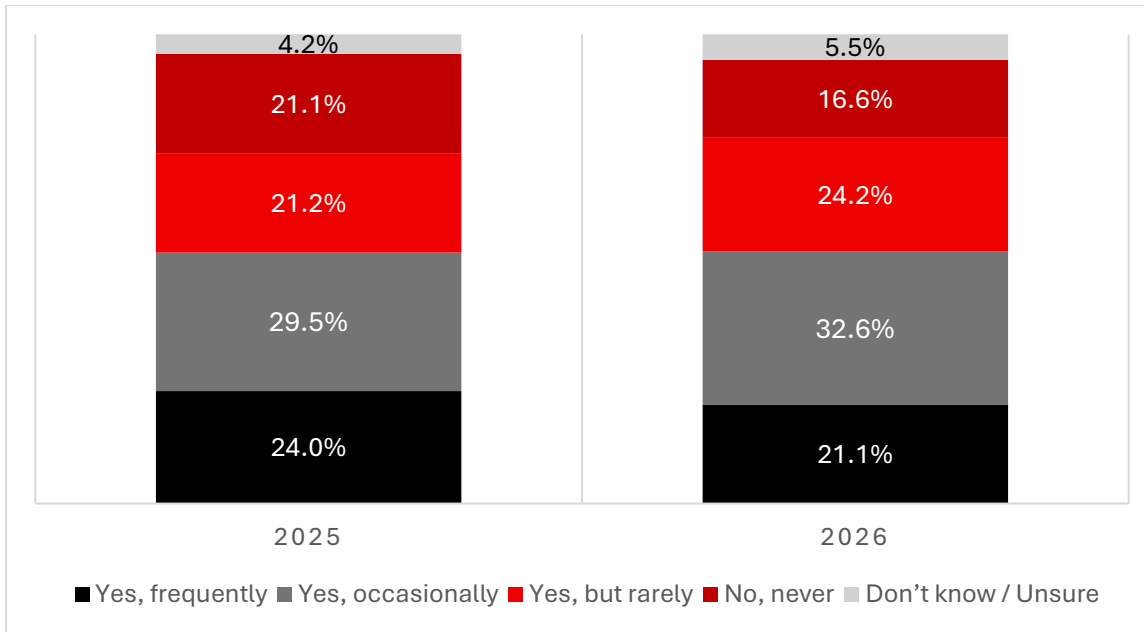
Question: *How do you usually receive information? Please select all that apply*



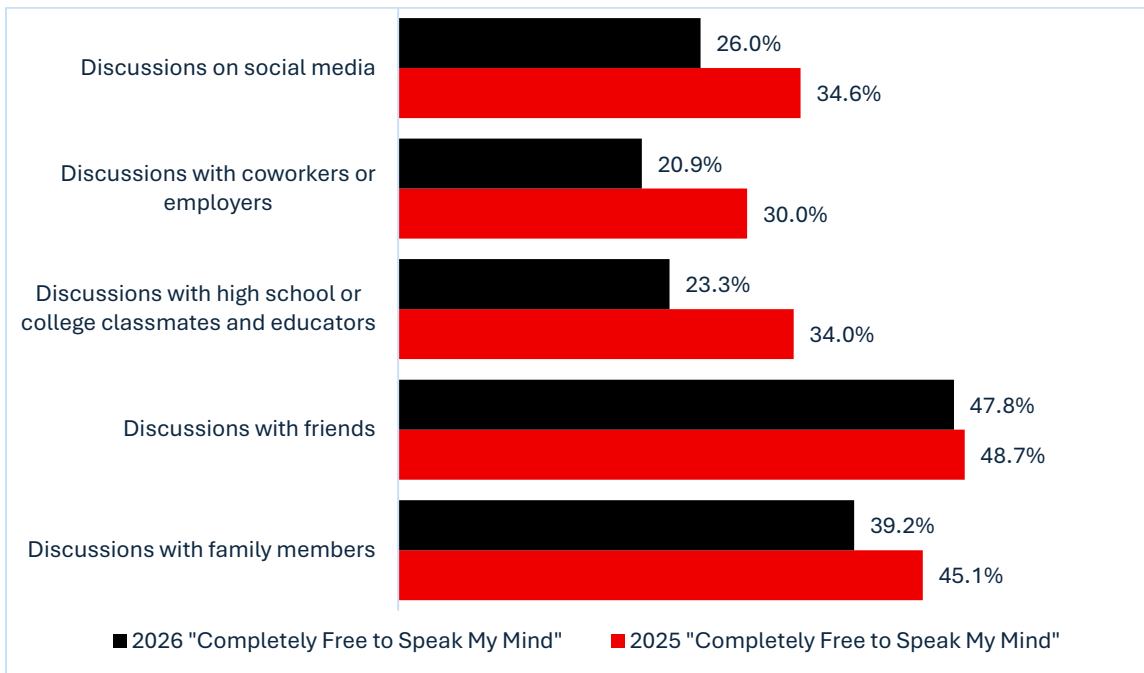
Question: *Please rate your level of TRUST for the following sources of information:*

It's Not Apathy, It's Caution: Why Youth Increasingly Self-Censor

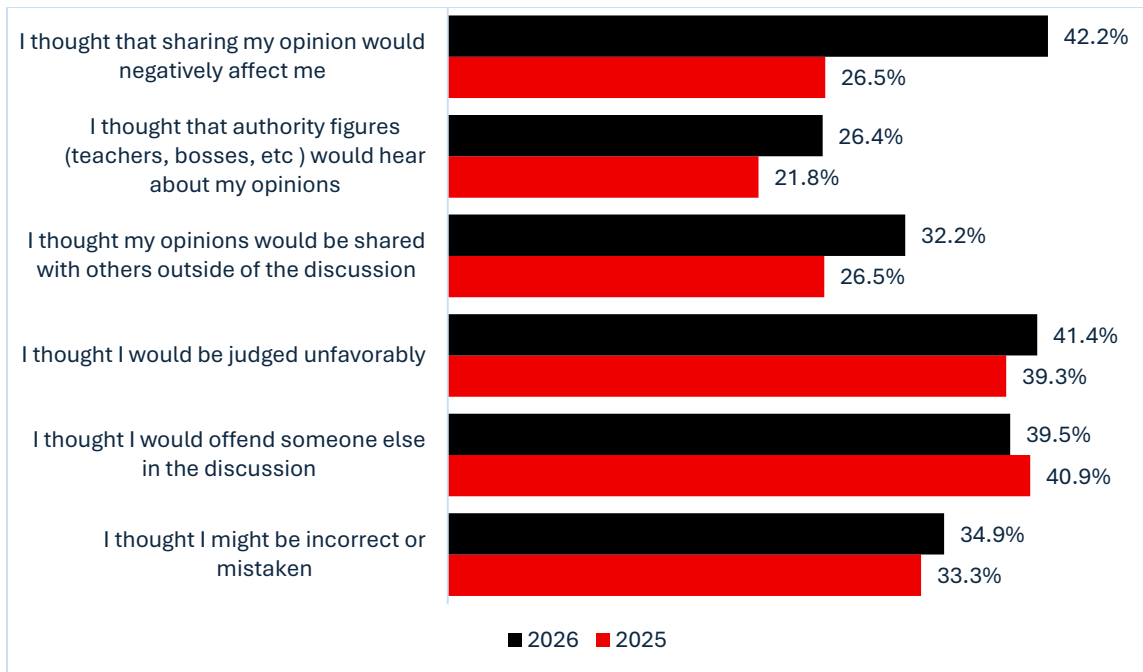
More than three-quarters say they have held back their opinions at some point in the past (77.9%), and relatively few feel completely free to speak. This is particularly the case on social media (26.0%) or at work (20.9%); notably, even in academic settings, just 23.3% feel completely free to speak with professors or educators, despite relatively high levels of trust in them. Concerns about negative consequences have increased year-over-year (42.2% vs. 26.5% in 2025), alongside persistent fears of being judged (41.4% vs. 39.3% in 2025).



Question: *Have you ever held back from sharing your opinions for fear of judgment or backlash?*



Question: *How free do you feel to speak your mind in...*



Question: *Which, if any, of the following were reasons that you stopped yourself from sharing your ideas or opinions with others? Please select all that apply*

Youth Engagement is Concentrated in Informal Communities Rather than Civic Institutions

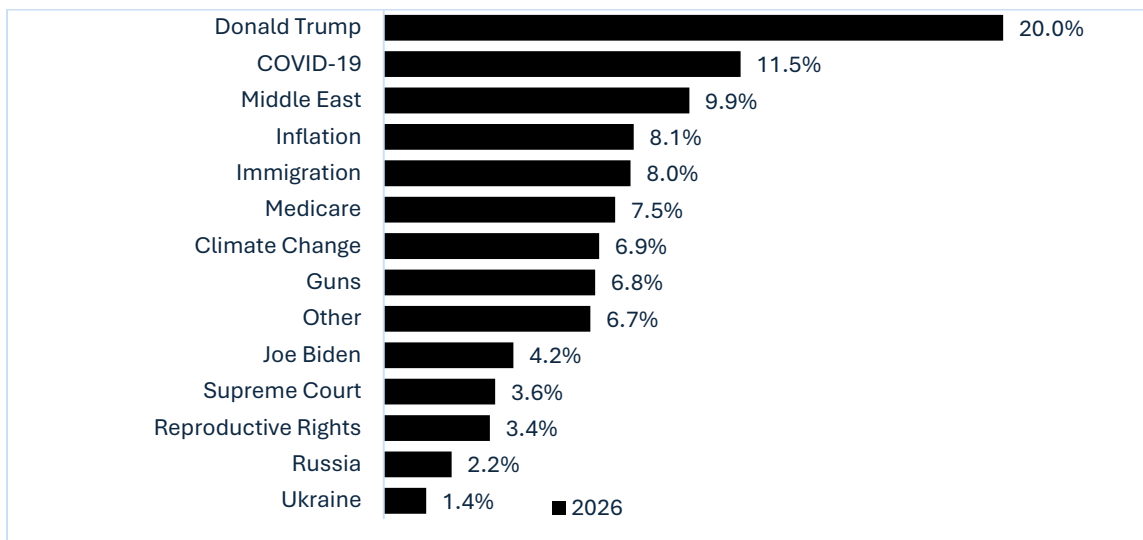
Participation patterns show that U.S. youth are most engaged in informal, interest-based activities, such as hobby groups (29.2%) and sports or outdoor activities (23.7%). However, involvement in more formal civic or political organizations remains limited, with just 10.2% planning to participate in political groups.



Question: *Do you plan to take any of the following actions this year? Please select all that apply*

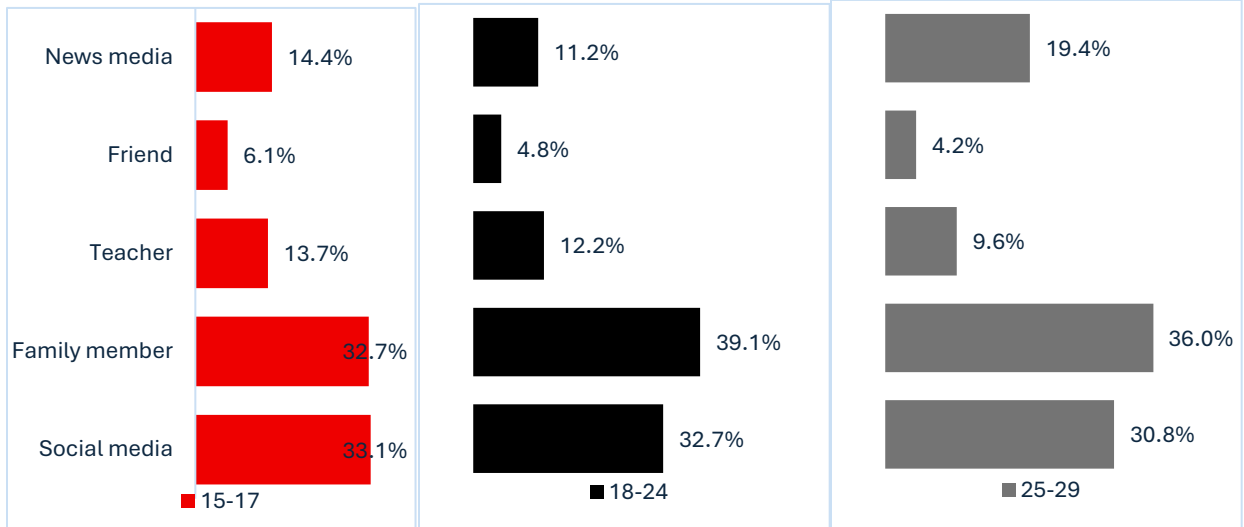
Youth Civic Identity Is Formed by National Moments

Young people’s first political memories are shaped primarily by national and global events—led by Donald Trump (20.0%), COVID-19 (11.5%), and geopolitical issues like the Middle East (9.9%)—rather than personal or local experiences, suggesting that civic awareness often begins at a distance from everyday life.



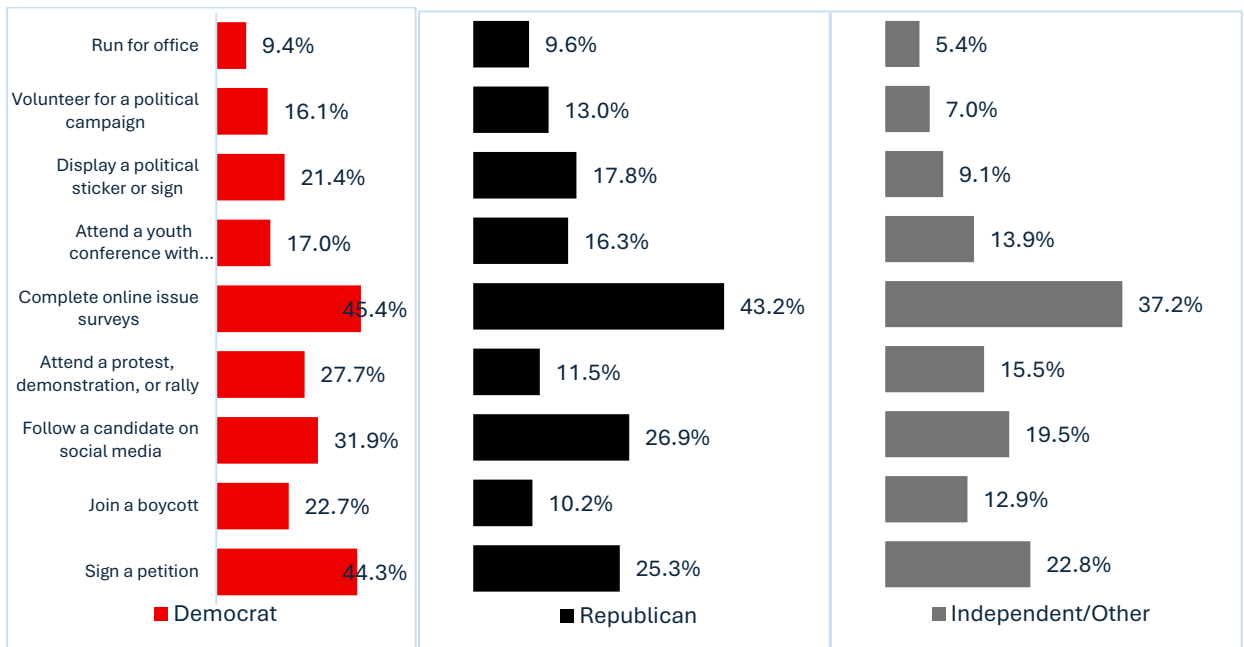
Question: *Which of the following is most directly connected to your first political memory? (Select one).*

Older U.S. youth are more likely to cite family as the primary source of their first political memory (39.1% ages 18–24; 36.0% ages 25–29), while younger respondents (15–17) are equally likely to point to family (32.7%) and social media (33.1%), highlighting a more divided set of early influences.

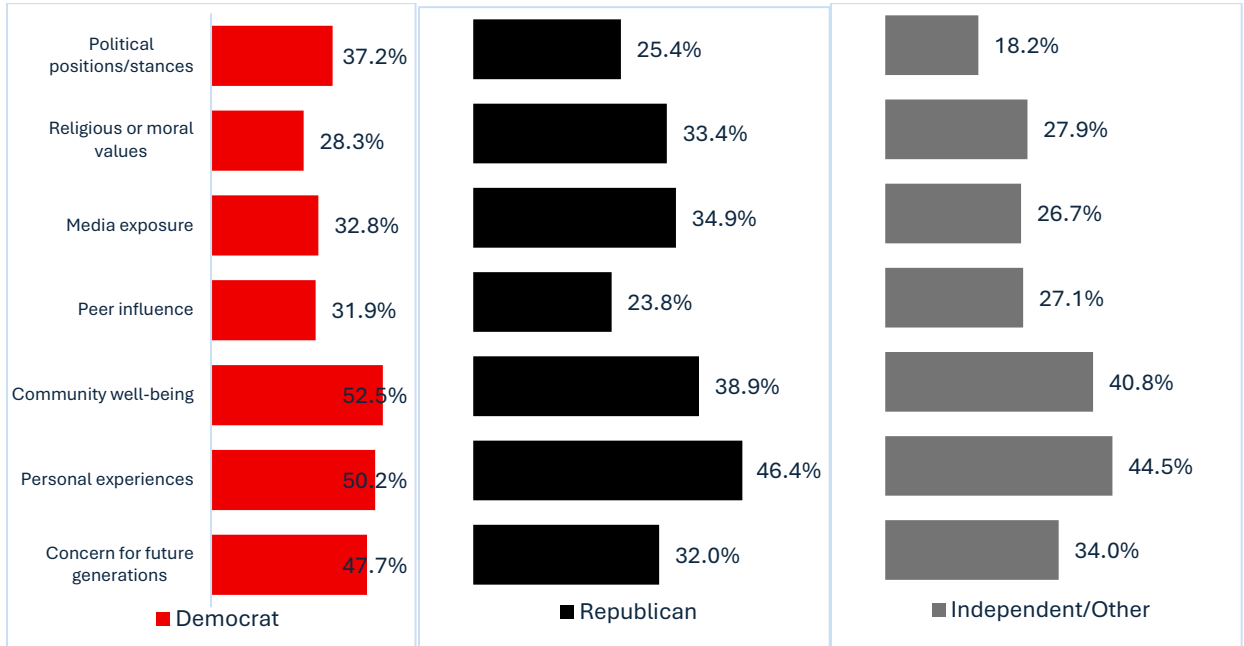


Partisan Identity Shapes Patterns of Civic Engagement

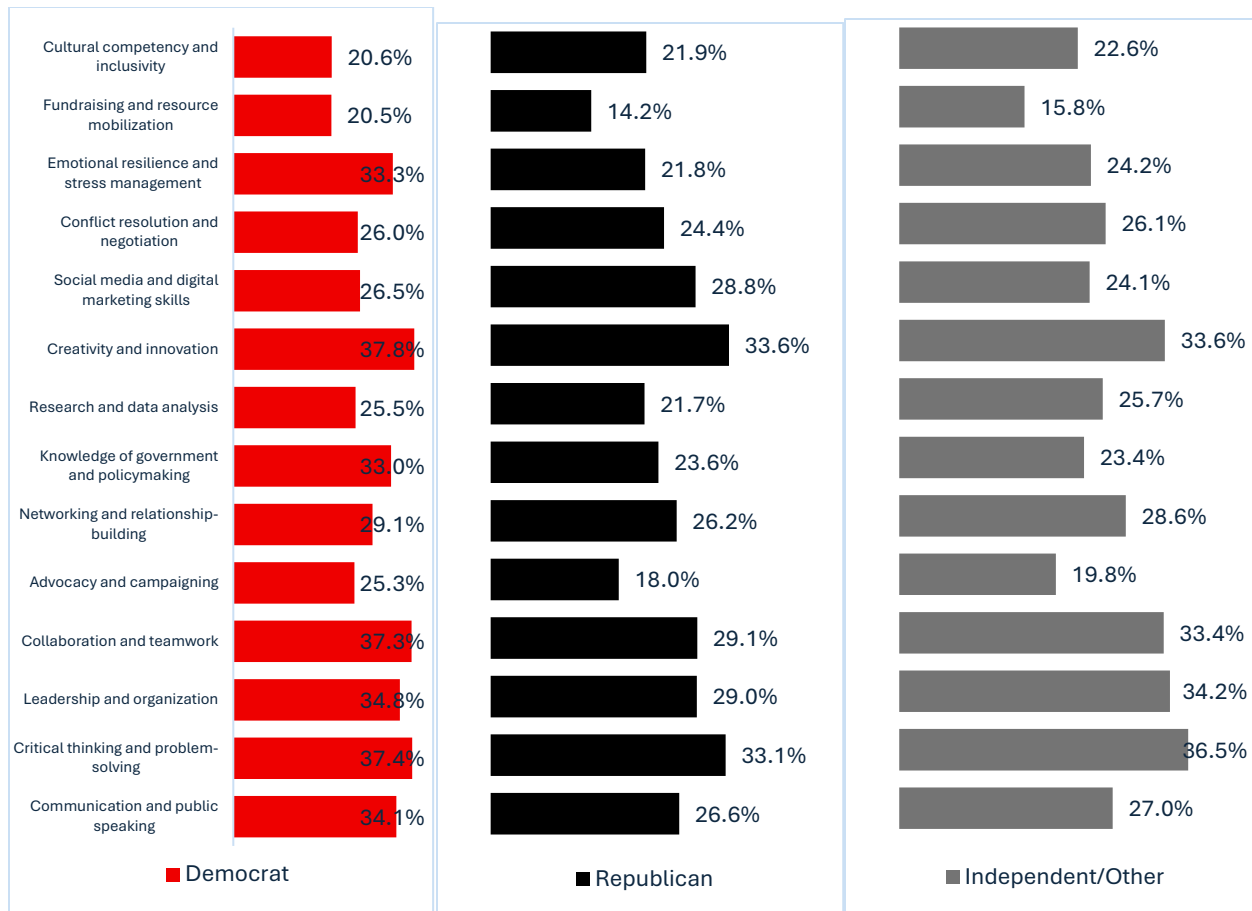
Civic engagement is highest among Democrats across nearly all activities, including petitions (44.3%) and protests (27.7%); while Independents more closely resemble Republicans in their participation levels, typically trailing Democrats and showing lower engagement in more active forms of participation.



Motivations for civic engagement also vary by political identity, with Democrats more likely to be driven by political positions (37.2% vs. 25.4% Republicans) and concern for future generations (47.7% vs. 32.0%), while Republicans are more likely to cite religious or moral values (33.4% vs. 28.3%) and media exposure (34.9% vs. 32.8%) as key influences.



More Democrats consistently rate a wide range of skills as important for engagement, especially creativity and innovation, (37.8%), critical thinking (37.4%), and collaboration (37.3%), while Republicans place less emphasis on most areas. Social media and digital marketing stand out as the only skill where Republicans place more emphasis than Democrats (28.8% vs. 26.5%), suggesting different approaches to how engagement is carried out.



Methodology

The survey was developed and conducted by the Institute for Sustainability & Social Justice at Sacred Heart University in collaboration with GreatBlue Research, Inc. The research aimed to understand U.S. youth’s awareness, perceptions and attitudes toward sustainability, social justice and climate change as well as the role higher education in addressing these issues.

Areas of Investigation

The survey explored numerous key areas:

- **Climate concern and emotional response (eco-anxiety):** Assessed levels of concern about climate change and the range of emotional responses it evokes among U.S. youth, including anxiety, hopelessness, and frustration.
- **Perceived importance of sustainability and social justice:** Evaluated how young people define and prioritize sustainability and social justice, including the perceived role of higher education in addressing these issues.
- **Beliefs about action and personal agency:** Explored perceptions of personal responsibility, confidence in one’s ability to take action, and the gap between recognizing the importance of issues and feeling equipped to address them.

- **Civic engagement and participation behaviors:** Examined how young people engage with social and civic issues, including participation in activities, preferred forms of engagement, and the extent to which engagement is active vs. low-barrier or digital.
- **Motivations for engagement:** Identified key drivers of action, including personal experiences, community well-being, political beliefs, and external influences such as media and peers.
- **Skills and capacities for action (IDGs):** Measured the importance of core capacities—such as critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, and emotional resilience—as well as practical skills needed to engage effectively.
- **Self-expression and social pressure:** Investigated the extent to which young people feel free to express their views, the prevalence of self-censorship, and the factors driving hesitation (e.g., fear of judgment or negative consequences).
- **Trust in institutions and individuals:** Assessed trust in institutions to address sustainability and social justice, alongside trust in individuals (e.g., professors, family), highlighting differences between systemic and interpersonal trust.
- **Information sources and trust:** Evaluated where young people receive information and which sources they trust most, including the role of social media, personal networks, and traditional media.
- **Demographic and political segmentation:** Collected demographic and political affiliation data to analyze differences in attitudes, behaviors, and motivations across key subgroups.

Methodology Highlights

- **Survey method:** Digital survey
- **Sample size:** N=1,500
- **Target audience:** U.S. residents aged 15 to 29
- **Poll margin of error:** 95% confidence interval margin of error $\pm 2.4\%$
- **Fielding period:** March 5, 2026 to March 12, 2026

Survey Programming and Pre-testing

The web survey was thoroughly tested across multiple platforms, including PC/laptop and mobile devices, by both GreatBlue Research staff and Sacred Heart University researchers. The GreatBlue Research project management team also reviewed test data in SPSS to ensure that the survey logic, including any randomizations, functioned correctly prior to launching the survey.

To further validate the survey process, a **pre-test** was conducted using 10% of the final sample (approximately N=150) over a 24-hour period. The pre-test data were carefully reviewed to identify any unforeseen issues with live data collection. Once confirmed that no problems were present, full-scale fielding was launched.

Data Collection

A random sample of U.S. residents aged 15 to 29 was invited to participate through opt-in digital panels. The sample was stratified by gender, age and geographic region to ensure broad representation.

Data Quality Assurance

To maintain data quality, GreatBlue Research implemented a series of checks. These included identifying respondents who engaged in satisficing behavior, such as leaving questions blank, speeding through the survey or consistently selecting the first or last response option. This quality check ensured that only high-quality data were included in the final analysis.

Weighting

Results were weighted according to age, education, gender, race/ethnicity and U.S. census region.

Sub-Group Analysis Margin of Error

95% confidence interval margin of error for sub-groups analyzed was as follows:

By age

15 to 17 Yos: $\pm 5.52\%$

18 to 21 Yos: $\pm 5.06\%$

22 to 24 Yos: $\pm 5.68\%$

25 to 29 Yos: $\pm 4.33\%$

By census region:

Northeast: $\pm 6.02\%$

Midwest: $\pm 5.78\%$

South: $\pm 3.77\%$

West: $\pm 5.94\%$

By gender:

Male: $\pm 4.25\%$

Female: $\pm 3.20\%$

By political affiliation:

Democrats: $\pm 4.37\%$

Republicans: $\pm 5.46\%$

Independent/Unaffiliated: $\pm 4.26\%$

By race/ethnicity

Hispanic: $\pm 5.95\%$

Non-Hispanic, White: $\pm 3.86\%$

Non-Hispanic, Black: $\pm 5.08\%$