



FIXING DEMOCRACY: FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

JULY 2024

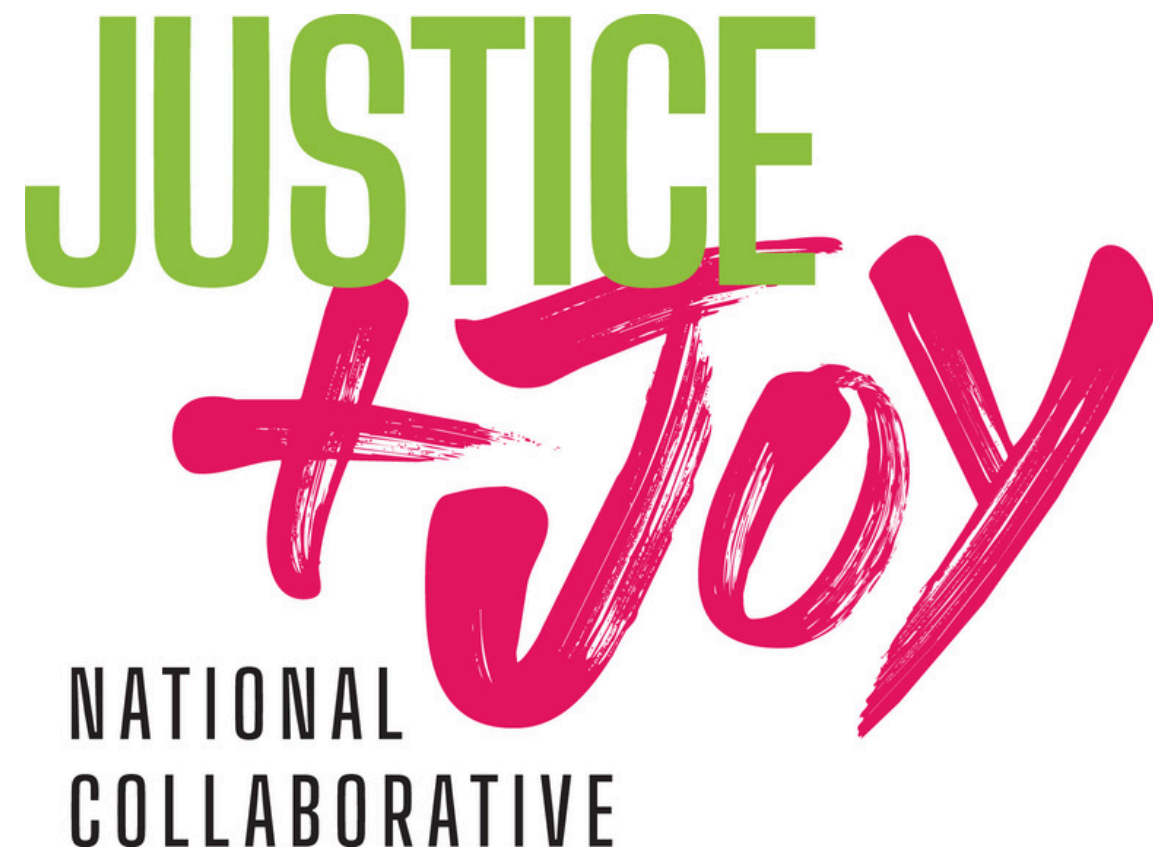


"To me in our current political climate, I think it's very important to begin understanding the language and ways young people show up in their civic duty. By understanding the intersections of identity and experiences that influence the way people participate, we can work towards helping young people tangibly see and use the different ways they hold power."

*- Addison, they/them, age 21
Washington, DC*

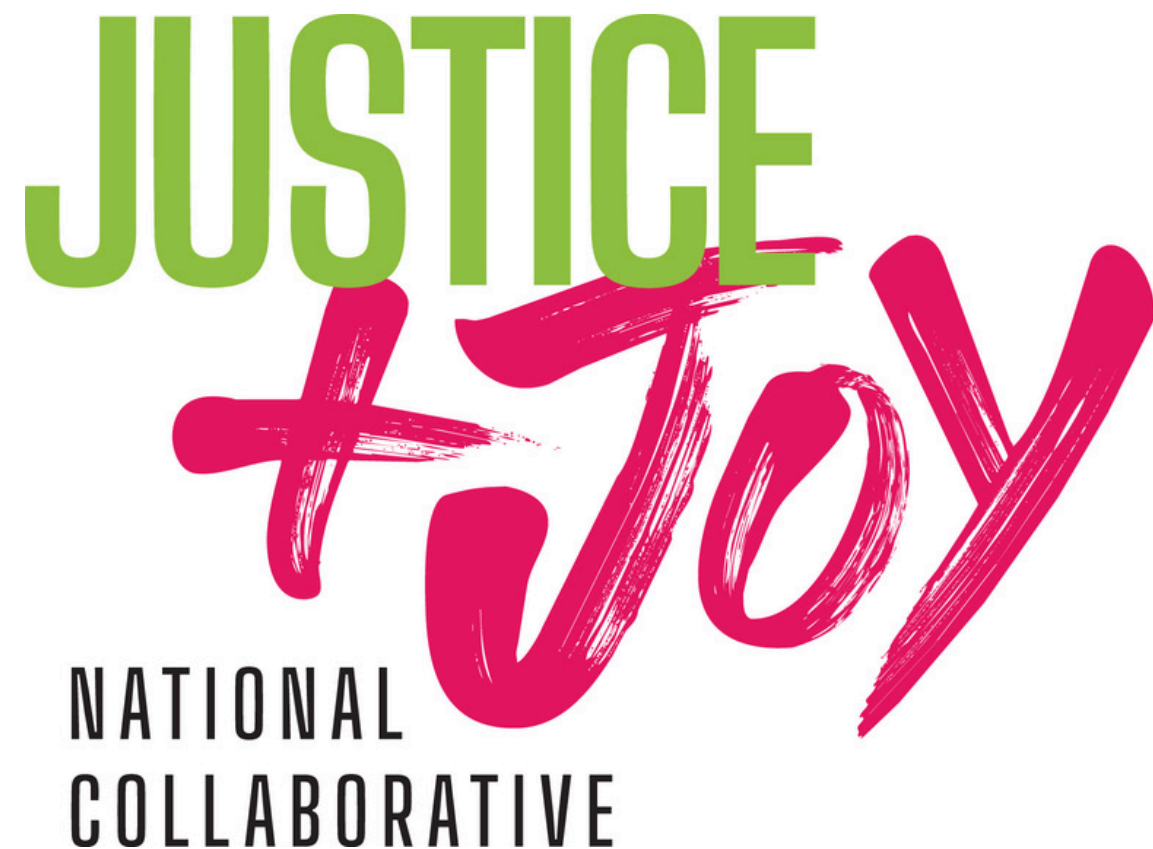
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INTRODUCTION



Young women, girls, and gender-expansive young people of color are both the lifeline and driving visionaries of our democracy. They always have been. They stand on the front lines, dedicating themselves as steadfast organizers, skilled communicators, and committed leaders of intergenerational movements, all while remaining fiercely committed to fixing a democracy that has never worked for them.

Despite the fact that they are underrepresented in elected office, and increasingly frustrated with a political system that continues to ignore their needs, they're still fighting for just, thriving futures for themselves and their communities.



A majority conservative Supreme Court, the prospect of Project 2025 becoming a reality, loss of bodily autonomy, affirmative action, and threats to free elections...

The state of American democracy is fragile, with freedom and justice hanging by a thread.

This could be the last free election in American history.

Justice + Joy knows that those most invisible and marginalized by society and systems hold the solutions. The same goes for our democracy.

Yet, young women and gender-expansive young people of color who have experienced negative system impact and chronic adversity are invisible in mainstream polling data.

OUR GOALS

Our initiative will accomplish two goals:

- 1** We are working with young people to mobilize their peers to the ballot box and provide the pathway for girls, young women, and gender-expansive young people of color to step into their power as catalysts for change.
- 2** We will work with young people to ignite long-term civic involvement. This initiative, at scale and over time, will build capacity for a youth-led movement that will strengthen the way young people show up and participate in democracy over the long haul, ensuring that future generations do the same.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1** Gauge young Americans' perception of democratic reform, attitudes towards engaging in the reform process, and their insights on the current state of the democracy.
- 2** Upon understanding where young people stand, we can then segment our audience and determine who among them are our base, persuasion, and mobilization audiences. This will discern the most receptive segments within the young community, which will enable Justice + Joy to strategically allocate resources and efforts more effectively.
- 3** Identify and test messages that effectively incorporate the aspirations and concerns of the young and diverse demographic, aligning these messages with their values and aspirations for a reformed democratic system in which they can truly participate. This will allow us to shift our messaging from "save democracy" to "fix democracy" and increase civic engagement.

OUR RESEARCH PARTNERS



“This is by far the most comprehensive and in-depth study of system-impacted girls, young women, transgender, and gender-expansive young people of color. Other studies may include these voices, but this study centers them. It comes at a time when we are at a crossroads and these voices are critical for progressive change and having true freedom.”



**Celinda Lake
President**

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“One of the myths that we constantly have to dispel is that just because young people are cynical about the system does not mean that they don't desperately want to be involved in some sort of change. And the thing that we hear most often, and I think that we heard in these groups as well, was the idea that they don't know what to do. We're not giving folks options. We're just telling them to vote for president. And that is falling flat.”

**Roshni Nedungadi
Chief Research Officer
& Founding Partner**

**OUR
RESEARCH
PARTNERS**

THE FOCUS GROUPS

Fifteen (15) focus groups convened in Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, and Los Angeles and virtually among young women and gender-expansive young people of color ages 16 to 25 who identify as:

- Black
- Latine
- Asian American/Pacific Islander
- Native/Indigenous
- Young mothers
- Transgender and gender-expansive
- Child welfare/foster care/juvenile or adult justice systems impacted
- Immigrants and refugees eligible to vote
- Survivors of sexual exploitation
- Having experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

THE 9 KEY FINDINGS

FINDING 1

Many worry about reaching a breaking point in the country, when people become so tired of working yet are unable to afford to live and meet basic needs. In some groups, participants mentioned worrying about a civil war.



“Like it feels like we’re coming to a collapse. It feels like every day we’re closer to war.”
- 16-19-year-old Black, Latine, Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Native/Indigenous young mother in Atlanta

FINDING 2

Liberation tends to be a stronger concept than freedom or democracy for transgender or gender-expansive groups compared to cisgender groups, who are less familiar or aligned with the term and prefer freedom.

“I would definitely say freedom means the most to me. Freedom gives you the luxury of experiencing life, but, you know, you also get to experience the consequences that come along with it. But you're just able to, you're able to move freely, there's nobody that's holding you back from anything. There's no one telling you how to live your life. You just live it how you see fit, you live it as you please and whatever consequences come along your way, you're able to take responsibility for that.” - 18-25-year-old Native/Indigenous woman



FINDING 3

The political actions people see as most effective tend to be voting (federally or on the state and local level) and mutual aid, described as “working together to meet each other’s needs, such as food and housing.” In their values and actions, participants are focused on interpersonal community care and meeting concrete basic needs of others.

“I think that we just live in a, like a broken system that was created like in the roots of like racism, slavery, colonialism, so like the framework that like we’re participating in and that we’re engaged in, it can work at some points, but we still have to remember that the overall system that we’re living in is broken. So should we even keep working in that system or is it time for us to like create a new system?” - 18-25-year-old young woman or gender-expansive person of color who has experience with the child welfare system/foster care/juvenile or adult justice



FINDING 4

Young women, transgender, and non-binary or gender-expansive people most value local change and find it more achievable over national change.

“Obviously, we need to focus on it, but I think we need to be more than ever educated on what’s happening in our state and local governments and we need to be focused on making sure that our local areas are safe first and foremost.” - 18-25-year-old Black, Latine, Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Native/Indigenous transgender man



FINDING 5

Participants are deeply cynical about the power of voting, particularly at a national level. Participants do not feel like politicians, especially Biden and Trump, represent them or listen to them, nor have they made their lives better. These presidential candidates are seen as too old and out of touch.



***“I mean like no options are good for us.”
- 18-25 year old Latine woman in Chicago***

FINDING 6

Participants do not think politicians have positive views of young people, women of color, LGBTQ people, or young mothers. At best, politicians are apathetic or view them as invisible, and at worst, they view these groups as subhuman and threats.



“Yeah, I mean even pre-2016, trans people weren't talked about that much. You know, it's just, it's a political move to keep us in public consciousness and cis people's minds all the time. It's just, I mean, again, we make up such a small percentage of the population and yet we make up so much media coverage. They don't think about any, they don't think of us as human at all. They think of us as a subject matter to sway voters, you know, get the evangelicals and the reactionaries out to vote, and to potentially harm the people who would be voting against, or fighting against such a thing.”

-18-25-year-old Black, Latine, Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Native/Indigenous transgender woman

FINDING 7

Community, family, and treating all people with dignity and respect are top values selected in most groups. Their values and how they see political change center on both individual and community or systemic level engagement. Coming together to create change is a tangible concept that resonates well.

“I feel like I really rely on community to feel supported. And I never feel like I didn’t have to like explain anything to them, like they, wholeheartedly support me and understand me. And so when I refer to community I’m thinking a lot about my friends, and I think more broadly, I’m thinking a lot about like working poor people and like, I don’t know, I think more generally people of color.” - 20-25-year-old gender-expansive Black, Latine, Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Native/Indigenous person



FINDING 8

Participants have confronted adverse childhood experiences and oppressive systems of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. They have first-hand experience with how unfairly and unevenly governmental, economic, and electoral systems function in our country. Despite this, they are resilient and committed to continuously strive for a better future for themselves and for others.



Democracy written in their own words: “Perhaps well-meaning, but deeply flawed. In need of change.” - Black, Latine, Asian American/Pacific Islander, or Native/Indigenous trans woman age 18 to 25

FINDING 9

An ideal candidate is a woman of color, young, and outspoken about issues that matter to them (such as trans rights, bodily autonomy, and a ceasefire in Palestine).

Ideal traits for a candidate running for office:

- **Future-oriented**
- **Woman**
- **Person of color**
- **Young**
- **Working-class**
- **Well-educated**
- **Confident**
- **Charming, likeable, charismatic**
- **Track record of creating change**
- **Background in organizing**
- **Self-aware**
- **Works for the people**



SUMMARY OF 9 KEY FINDINGS

- 1** Many worry about the country reaching a breaking point, when people get so tired of working while being unable to afford to live and meet basic needs. Some participants worried about a civil war.
- 2** “Liberation” tends to be a stronger concept than freedom or democracy for transgender or gender-expansive groups compared to cisgender groups, who are less familiar or aligned with the term and prefer “freedom”.
- 3** The political actions people see as most effective tend to be voting (federally or on the state and local level) and mutual aid, described as “working together to meet each other’s needs, such as food and housing.”
- 4** Young women, transgender, nonbinary or gender-expansive people most value local change and find it more achievable over national change.
- 5** Participants are deeply cynical about the power of voting, particularly at a national level.

SUMMARY OF 9 KEY FINDINGS (CONT'D)

- 6 Young women, transgender, and non-binary or gender-expansive people of color feel devalued by our democratic processes and political representatives.
- 7 Community, family, and treating all people with dignity and respect are top values selected in most groups.
- 8 Despite confronting adverse childhood experiences and oppressive systems of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism with first-hand experience of how unfairly and unevenly governmental, economic, and electoral systems function in our country, participants are resilient and committed to continuously strive for a better future for themselves and for others.
- 9 An ideal candidate is a woman of color, young, and outspoken about issues that matter to them (such as trans rights, bodily autonomy, and a ceasefire in Palestine).

NEXT STEPS

HIT will take what we've learned in Phase 1 to conduct a virtual national messaging survey to determine what messages will reach and connect with key audiences.

Then, those messages, including visuals, will be tested through focus groups to ensure resonance and stickiness with key audiences.

Tools and strategies for dissemination will be developed, shared broadly, and put into action.



IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH TO DATE

- At a macro level, the “democracy” messages currently used in all campaigns and by the media completely miss this group within Gen Z, and that is doubly true for the groups centered in the “Fixing Democracy” research.
- Within the “movements” dedicated to advancing justice for cis, trans and gender-expansive girls and young women our language appears to be dividing rather than unifying us across groups and generations.
- Building intergenerational activism requires us to address both of the above if we are to flex our collective will to gain and sustain rights recently lost.

So, what are we waiting for?

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For more information contact:

Jeannette Pai-Espinosa (jeannette@justiceandjoynatl.org)

Maryann Jacob Macias (maryann@justiceandjoynatl.org)