

BUILDING POLITICAL HOMES TO ENGAGE YOUNG VOTERS IN 2026

LEELA STRONG, NEWHOUSE DIRECTOR OF CIRCLE

MINNESOTA STUDENT VOTE SUMMIT | JUNE 8, 2026



ABOUT ME



LEELA STRONG

- Newhouse Director of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)
- Oversee research on youth civic participation, voting trends, civic education, and policies affecting young Americans' civic life
- 25 years of experience spanning nonprofits, philanthropy, and corporate social impact

ABOUT CIRCLE

A non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. Based at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life

Extensive research on youth participation, and work with partners and practitioners who apply that research to improve civic learning and participation opportunities for all young people.

We seek to understand the structural and motivational barriers to youth engagement to inform and empower practitioners to take action.

OVERVIEW

⊕ POTENTIAL ELECTORAL IMPACT IN MINNESOTA

- Highlights from the 2026 YESI Rankings

⊕ 2026 PRE-ELECTION POLL

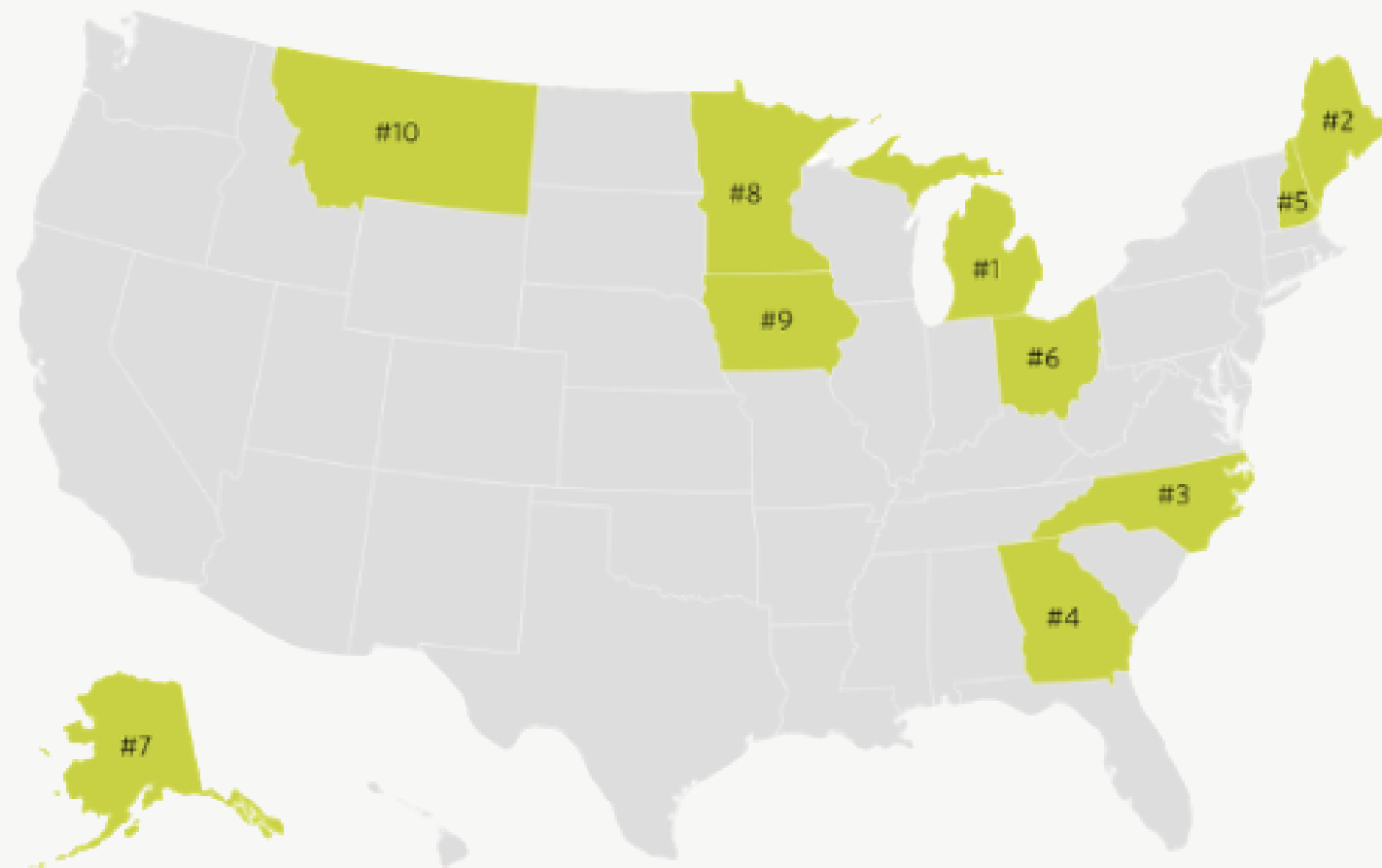
- Exclusive data on youth views and needs

⊕ POLITICAL HOMES

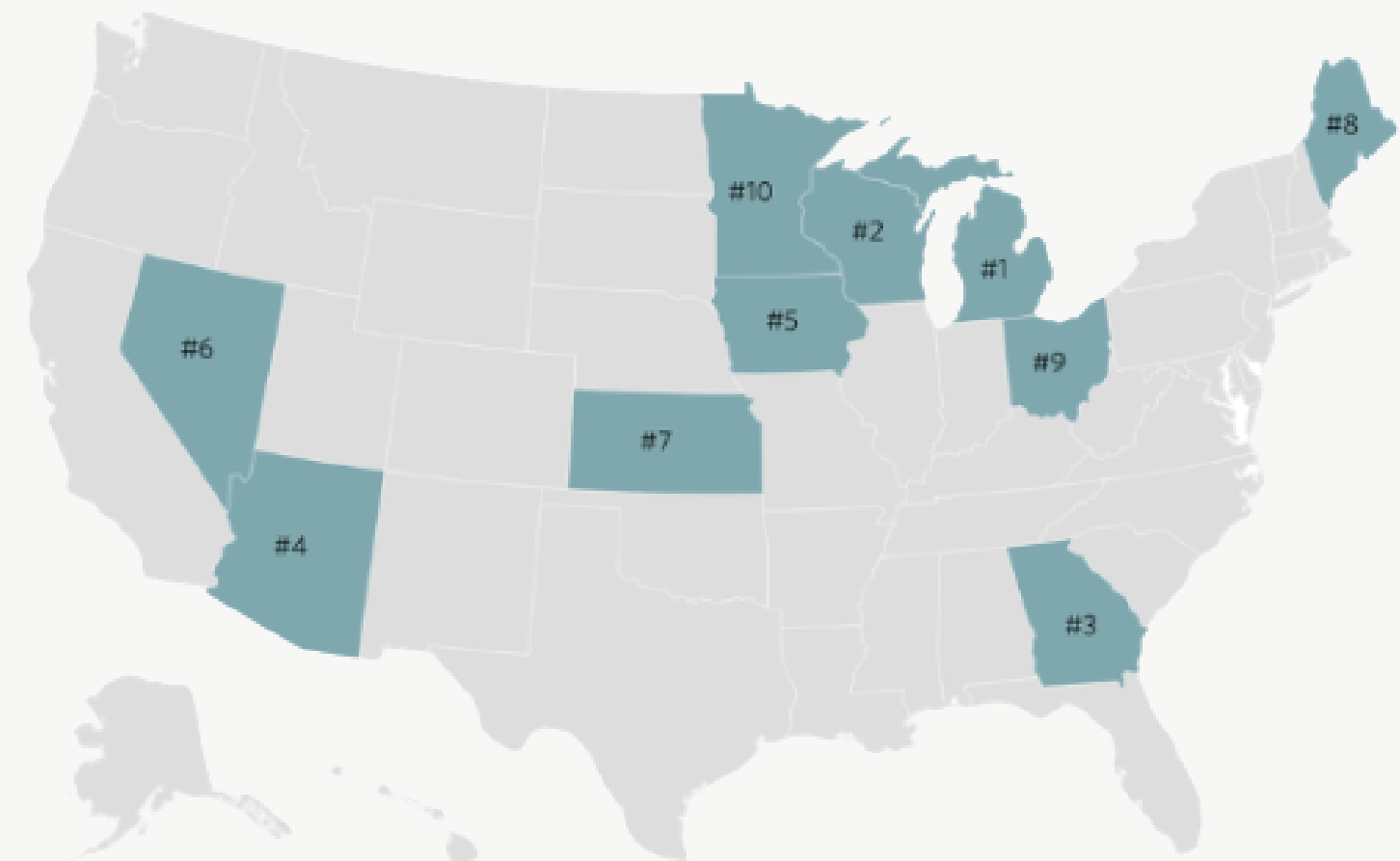
- What are they? How do we build and improve them?

YESI – WHERE YOUTH CAN IMPACT ELECTIONS

TOP 10 2026 SENATE RACES



TOP 10 2026 GOVERNOR RACES



LEARN MORE: [CIRCLE.TUFTS.EDU/YESI2026](https://circle.tufts.edu/YESI2026)

MINNESOTA ELECTIONS IN YESI RANKINGS



#8 SENATE RACE

#10 GOVERNOR RACE

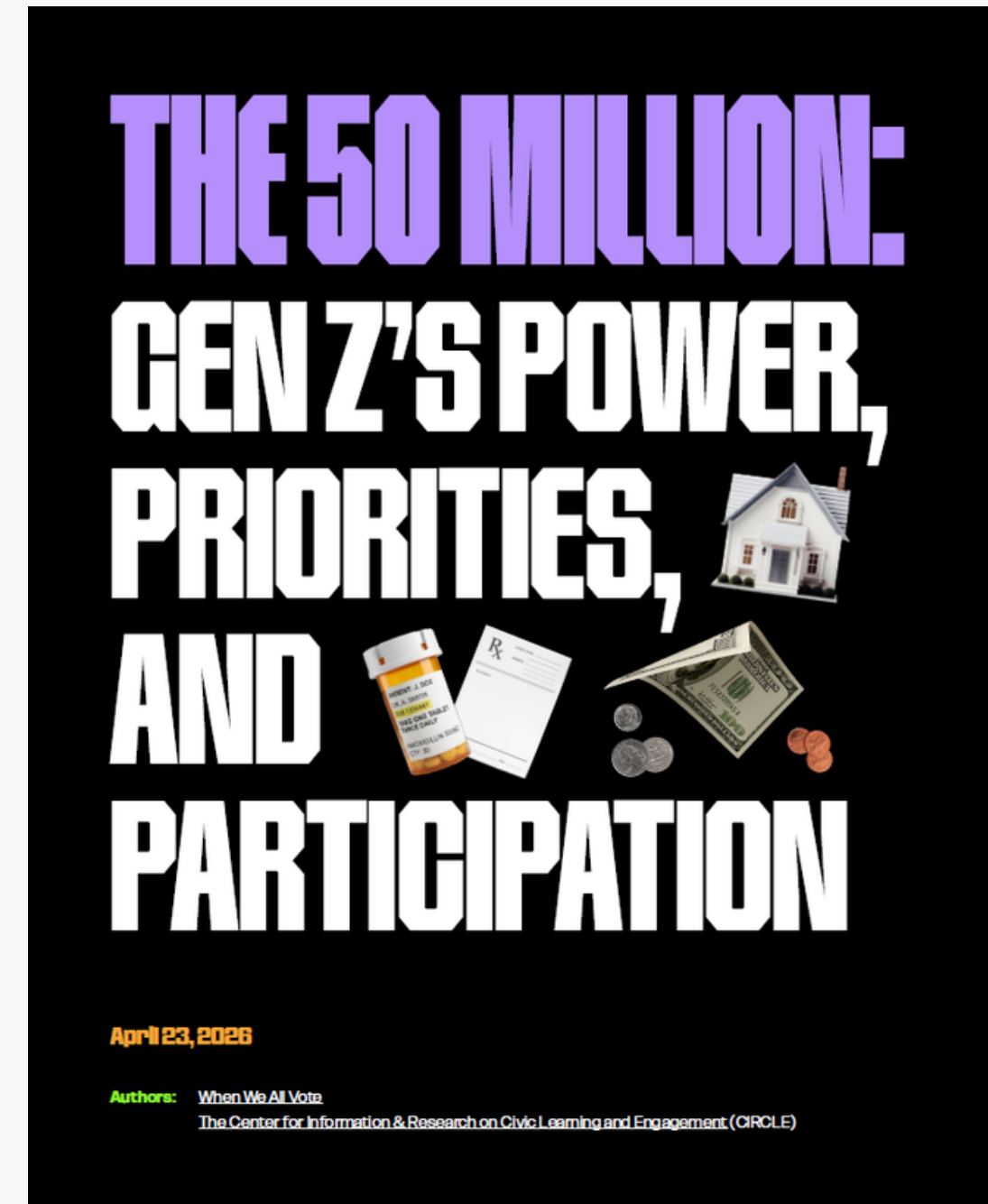
LEARN MORE: [CIRCLE.TUFTS.EDU/YESI2026](https://circle.tufts.edu/YESI2026)

CIRCLE 2026 PRE-ELECTION POLL

■ ABOUT THE SURVEY + REPORT

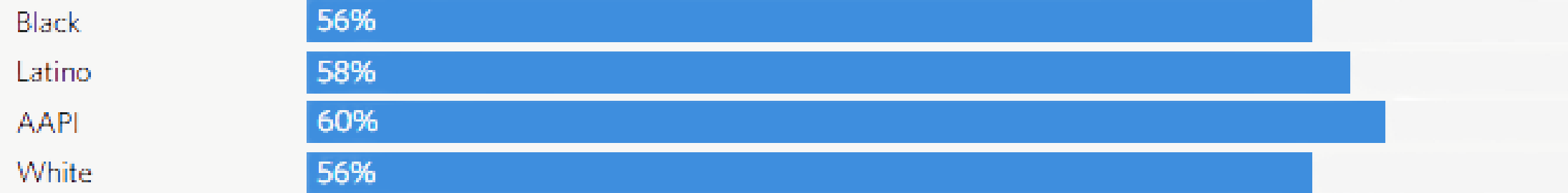
A survey of 5,549 adults between the ages of 18–29 in the U.S., with oversamples of Gen Z adults identifying as Black or Latino.

Fielded Jan–Feb 2026



LIKELIHOOD TO VOTE IS HIGH BUT UNEQUAL

Race/Ethnicity



Gender



Education



Financial Situation



Party ID



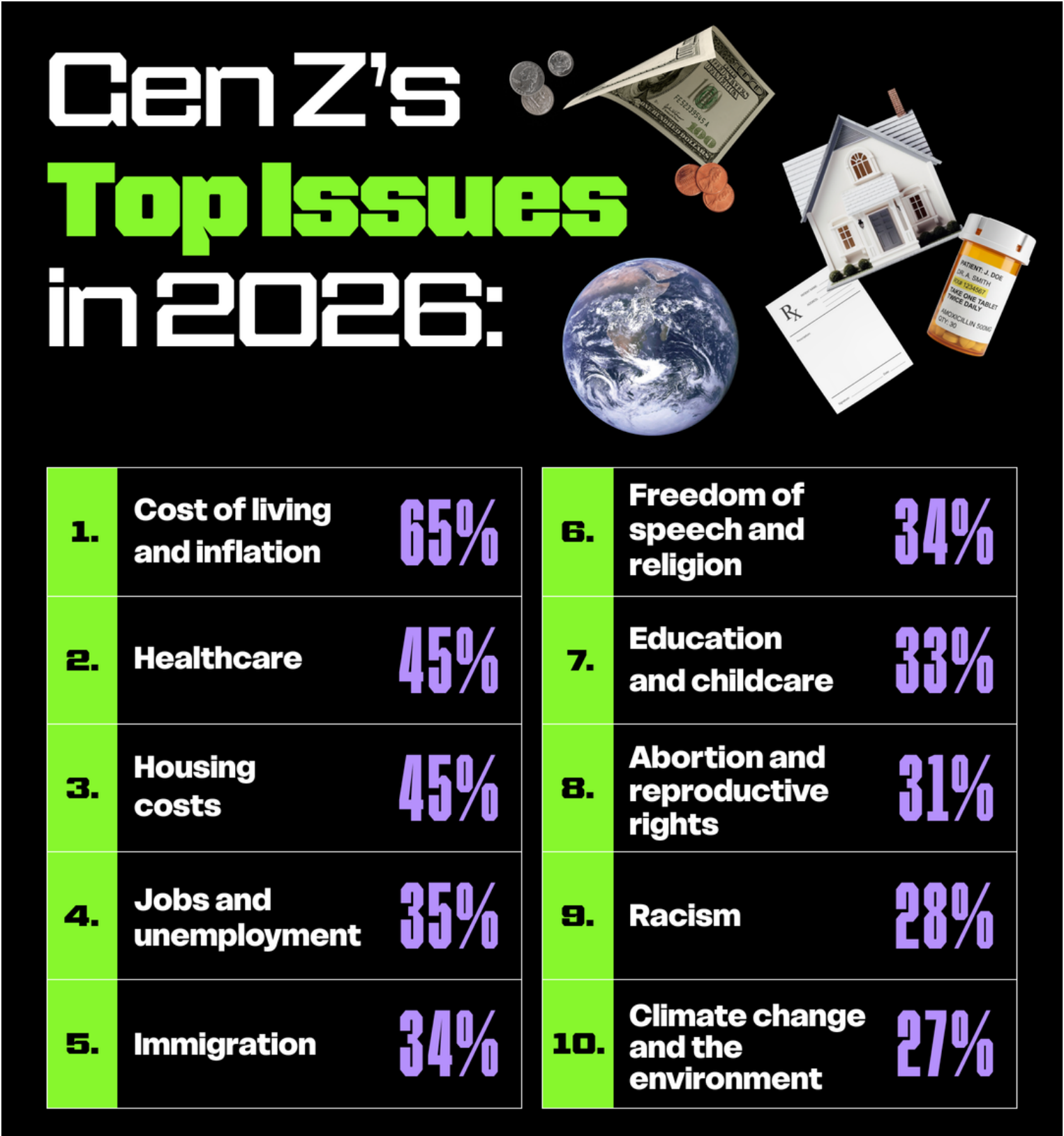
56%

of all youth say
they're
"extremely
likely" to vote
in 2026

LOGISTICS AND LACK OF INFO ARE STILL BARRIERS

BARRIERS	OVERALL	BLACK	LATINX	BASE DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS + LEANERS	BASE REPUBLICANS
I haven't experienced any barriers to voting	50%	45%	47%	48%	47%	62%
Lack of information about candidates	28%	32%	30%	29%	31%	19%
Lack of information about ballot issues	20%	25%	22%	23%	22%	13%
Issues getting time off work	14%	17%	14%	14%	14%	13%
Not knowing where to vote	10%	9%	13%	12%	10%	8%
Trouble getting to my polling place (transportation)	8%	12%	9%	8%	10%	6%
Challenges registering to vote	7%	11%	8%	8%	7%	4%

TOP ISSUES: ECONOMIC CONCERNS



- Across all demographic groups, **cost of living / inflation** is the top priority, alongside other economic issues.
- Other top-10 issues: immigration, abortion, climate change, etc.

YOUTH ARE MOTIVATED BY POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

I participate because I dislike the way politics works right now and I want to change it

35%

I participate because it makes a difference

27%

I participate because I know it's supposed to matter, but I don't think it really does

18%

I don't participate, but would if politics were different

8%

I don't participate because I'm just not interested in politics and I don't think I ever will be

7%

I want to participate, but difficulties in my life are holding me back

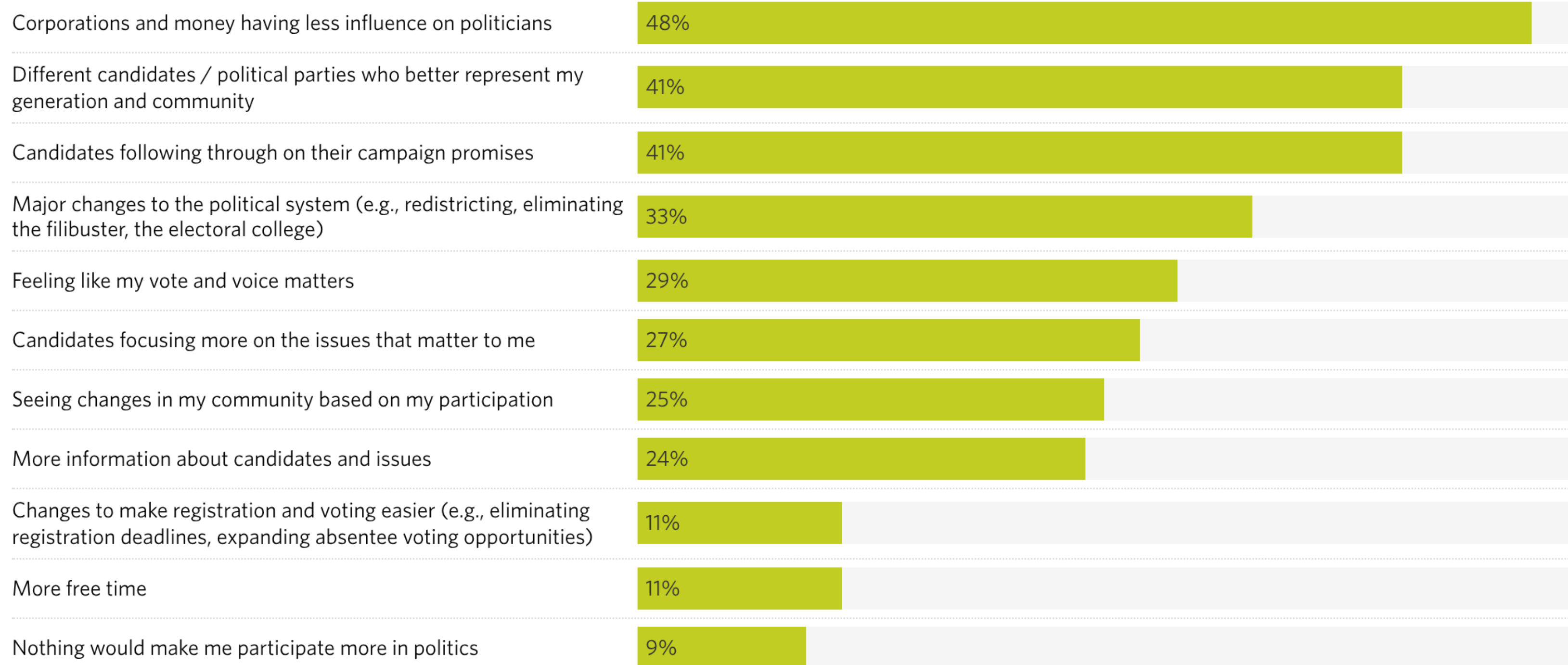
3%

I want to participate, but I don't know how

3%

YOUTH HAVE CRITIQUES OF DEMOCRACY

The percentage of youth, ages 18-29, who chose each as a top change that would make them participate in politics more.





INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

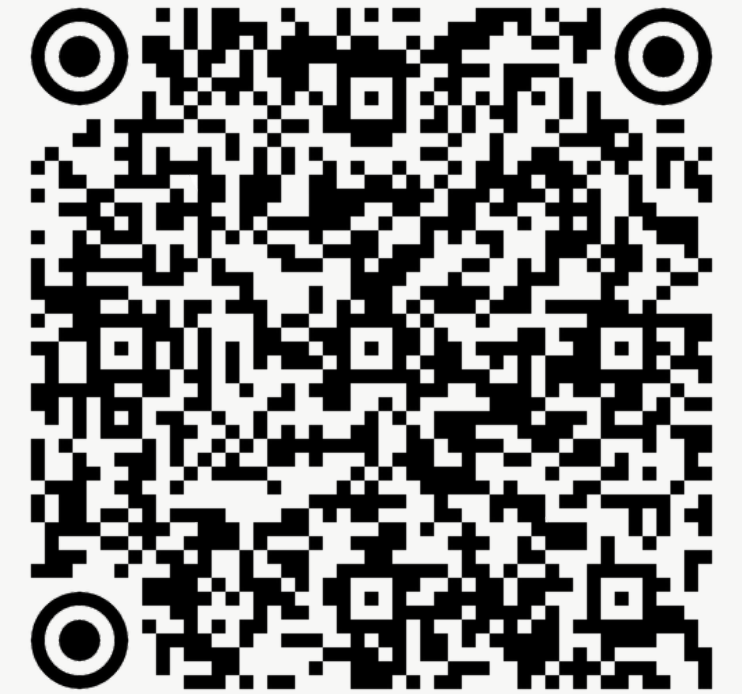
- Engage students through the context of their experiences, especially with the economy
- Help students make the connection between what they care about and their choices at the ballot box
- Youth want to feel listened to, represented, and like elected officials are accountable to them.
- Sell youth on the potential for change, not on supporting a political system they know is flawed.

POLITICAL HOMES

READ THE
REPORT

■ WHAT ARE THEY?

A political home is a space where young people can imagine, participate in, and build a better future, grounded in relationships built on accountability with each other and with supportive adults.



■ WHY ARE THEY NEEDED?

- Only 16% of youth feel democracy is working well for their generation.
- Only 24% of youth feel like they are a part of a movement that helps them express themselves politically.
- Half of youth say they rarely or never spend time in person with fellow members of their community.

FIVE CORE ELEMENTS

SPACE FOR BELONGING



Create the “home” in political homes, by providing space for young people to connect and form lifelong relationships

POLITICAL IDENTITY



Provide the knowledge, motivation, and civic skills needed to participate in their democracy

MEETING BASIC NEEDS



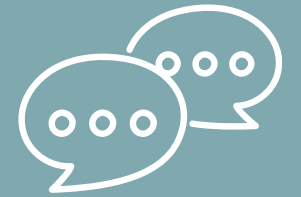
Provide safe ‘third spaces’ and address barriers to participation, such as food, financial compensation, and transportation

LIFE AND CAREER PREPARATION



Provide youth with college application support, financial aid guidance, and professional skill development

DEVELOPING YOUTH VOICE



Create multiple low-barrier entry points, leadership pipelines, and ways for youth to make their voices heard

Youth Political Homes ToolKit

By: Seona Maskara, Sara Suzuki,
Ruby Belle Booth, Alberto Medina

A Space for Belonging

Evaluation

- ☐ Members feel like they are part of and connected to the organization.
- ☐ Members feel pride in the organization.
- ☐ Members feel safe in the organization.
- ☐ Members have made friends at this organization

Conversation Prompts

-  Do you feel included in this space? What could help you feel more included?
-  Do you feel like you can create friendships with people in this organization? Why or why not?
-  Are there things you feel like you can/cannot talk about in this space? (E.g., friendships, life issues, jokes, etc.)

Developing Political Identity

Evaluation

Being part of this organization:

- ☐ Helps members access information related to community issues.
- ☐ Helps members feel they can influence decisions that affect their community.
- ☐ Gives members a better understanding of the important political issues in our country.
- ☐ Means that members feel free to disagree openly with each other and others about political and social issues.

Conversation Prompts



Do you feel like you understand what's happening in the country? Does the organization help you with that? Why or why not?



What kinds of conversations about politics and the news would you be interested in having with people in this organization?



Can you talk about politics with people in the organization with different views from you? Why or why not?

Meeting Basic Needs

Evaluation

- ☐ There are people in this organization who members can turn to when they need help.
- ☐ People in this organization work together to help each other in times of personal crisis.
- ☐ The organization provides members with some basic needs.
- ☐ The organization supports the mental health of members in the organization.

Conversation Prompts

-  Does being part of this organization cause you financial stress?
-  Are you able to have a job while being part of this organization?
-  Do you feel like your most pressing needs (eg, food, mental health, third space, etc.) are being met while at the organization? What could help?
-  Do you have trouble physically getting to this organization or face other barriers to participating? What could help?
-  How does being part of this organization impact your mental health? What support do you need?

Preparing for Life and Career

Evaluation

- ☐ Members can get advice about setting career or educational goals at this organization
- ☐ This organization exposes members to different careers and educational paths.
- ☐ The organization helps members find funding sources for my future career path or educational goals.
- ☐ The organization provides youth opportunities to develop skills which will be useful in future career / educational pursuits.
- ☐ The organization provides hands-on opportunities to gain lived experience to benefit future civic engagement.

Conversation Prompts

-  What do you think your next steps are? What help do you need in figuring this out?
-  Does this organization provide space to talk about career and the future?
-  Do you have people you can talk to who have gone through the application (college or job) process before?
-  Have you learned/developed skills for future work through involvement at this organization?

Developing Youth Voice

Evaluation

In the organization...

- ☐ Members know that their opinions matters to others.
- ☐ Members feel that they can influence what this organization is like (through feedback and/or leadership).
- ☐ There are efforts to meet the needs and goals expressed by all members.
- ☐ Members have opportunities to initiate or lead a project.
- ☐ Members have leadership opportunities and understand the pathways to getting them.

Conversation Prompts



Do you feel like your opinion matters in determining what the organization does? Why or why not?



What leadership opportunities would you like to see in the organization?



If you have feedback, do you know who to talk to/where to go?

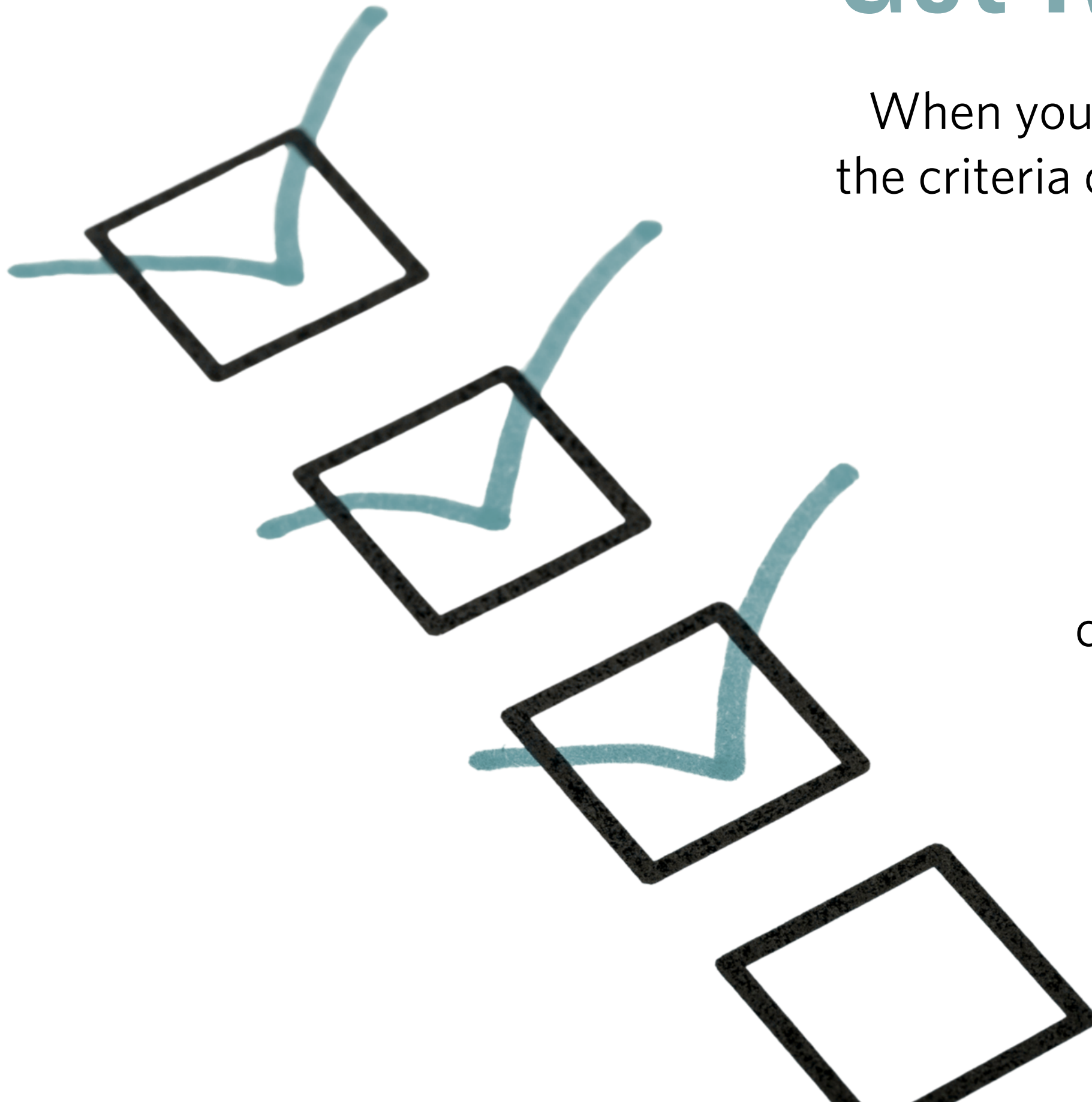


Do you feel empowered to speak up about what you want to change in the organization?

Get Ready to Make a Plan

When you have evaluated your organization according to the criteria outlined in this toolkit, get ready to take action!

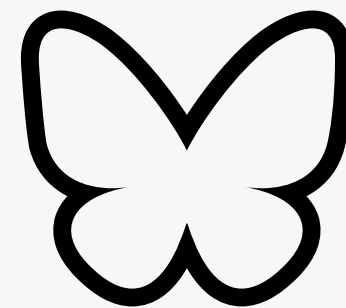
Use the next page to set long-, medium-, and short-term goals that will advance your organization's journey toward becoming a stronger political home for youth. Consider starting and focusing on the areas where you checked the fewest boxes in the previous pages and there is a bigger need for improvement!



EXAMPLE

Element + Area for Improvement	Long-Term Goal (i.e., the identified gap is filled)	Medium-Term Goal	Short-Term Goal
Developing Political Identity Members do not discuss current events with each other	Have monthly discussions about current events, reflecting on articles representing different sides of an issue	Have one such discussion with members surrounding a current event, and send out a feedback form after.	Schedule a conversation with youth members to discuss what norms they would need to have a political discussion.

CONNECT



@civicyouth



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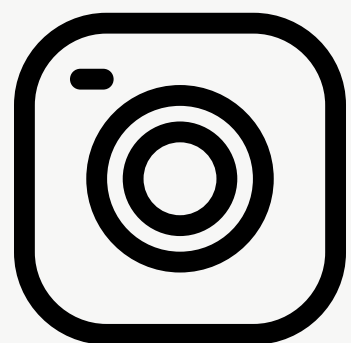
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THANK YOU!

