

To: Voter Participation Center

From: GBAO

Date: March 8, 2024

## Unregistered Voter Topline Focus Group Findings

This memo summarizes findings of four recent online focus groups with people who are not registered to vote. GBAO conducted these groups on February 21-22, 2024, with the following audiences. Each group consisted of 6 to 7 participants.

- Unmarried Women over 35, not registered to vote
- Women under 35, not registered to vote
- Latinos & Latinas, not registered to vote
- Men under 35, not registered to vote

Please note that qualitative research findings are directional and not projectable onto the population at large.

### Key Findings

- **Social media exerts significant influence on these audiences.**
- **Unregistered voters feel overwhelmed, stuck, or strained.**
- **Younger participants tend to experience greater anxiety when it comes to making life decisions, contrasting with older participants who exhibit more confidence in their life choices.**
- **Participants utilize a range of coping mechanisms, with self-reflection and meditation being prevalent.**
- **Many describe feeling isolated from their local communities, attributing this to factors such as increased online activity, limited outdoor interaction, and minor conflicts among neighbors.**
- **Some find community through friends and family because of shared values and interests.**
- **Cultural differences and misunderstandings can exacerbate feelings of exclusion among people of color within their communities.**
- **Local connection and contributing to the community around you can come in many forms big and small.**
- **A multitude of barriers to voter registration exist, including feeling uninformed, disdain for politics, skepticism about fairness, logistical challenges, concerns about jury duty, and a pervasive sense of apathy towards the impact of elections on people's daily lives or their ability to produce change.**
- **Few participants display a willingness to change their view on voting, but there appear to be some openings on abortion or local issues and from social pressure.**



Below are detailed findings from the focus groups.

### **Social media looms large. Very large.**

Participants spend a substantial amount of time consuming information on social media platforms. TikTok is by far the most used platform for this audience. One unmarried woman explains the power of the TikTok algorithm, saying: *“It just draws [you in]. Sometimes I'm thinking things, and it'll show up on my For You page.”* YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook are also widely used social media platforms. The content unregistered voters watch on these platforms varies widely depending on their interests. Some watch things related to their daily lives like cleaning, cooking, and health and wellness. Others watch leisure content such as travel, beauty, car shows or even how to invest in cryptocurrencies.

*“My guilty pleasure is TikTok. I'm addicted to TikTok, I can scroll through it for hours and not realize what's going on.”*  
(older woman)

*“It's really easy [for TikTok] to get my attention. So I'll watch a whole 2 hour movie in 30 second intervals on TikTok.”*  
(younger woman)

Participants also mention watching a variety of TV shows on cable TV, such as Bravo or HGTV, or streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Paramount Plus. Notably, none of the participants voluntarily mentioned that they follow the news.

### **Many of our unregistered voters report feeling stretched thin, stuck, or struggling.**

Across all of our groups, a majority of participants express stress about their current situations and concern about whether they are prepared for what might come next.

Some of these concerns were related to the economy, with participants citing the rise in prices due to inflation, rent increases, and job prospects. Some participants acknowledged that, since prices rose, they have had to become more selective about what activities they do and what they spend their money on. Several of our participants discussed being on the hunt for a new job while others talked about the stress and uncertainty from recent job transitions.

*“Prices went up on everything. Things are definitely more expensive and harder to get these days.”*  
(Latino)

*“I'm afraid of making mistakes when it comes to parenting because I didn't have great role models growing up. Everything that I'm doing is new and I'm trying to avoid the same pitfalls.”* (Younger man)

*“I'm so focused on school, I don't have a lot of time to talk to people.”* (Younger woman)

*“I'm kind of in a new career... ever since I've started, I'm having these panic attacks and my heart rate jumps around, it skips... because I'm out of my norm... the stress is getting to me.”* (Latino)

Another burden often mentioned was the difficulty of managing their daily lives. Participants with children (or those expecting children soon) shared fears around the unknowns of parenting and their desire to do well, and some parents recounted the challenge of balancing family responsibilities with school or work. Among our younger respondents, school was also a source of stress, as participants expressed a desire to do well and succeed, while also acknowledging that there is “a lot of room for error” in their early stage of life.

### **Older respondents tend to feel proud of where they are in life, while younger participants are more anxious about making the right decisions.**

In assessing their personal life, older and younger respondents show some differences in how they view where they were. Older participants who have been able to accomplish things like raising a family, owning a house, or making progress in their career tend to share a sense of satisfaction and pride in their choices and outcomes.

*“I’ve accomplished something in every arena... there’s a lot left to accomplish, but I can feel myself stacking wins and rolling with the punches better than I used to.” (Latino)*

*“I feel accomplished in my business. I feel accomplished with my children. They’re grown. They’re doing well for themselves. I feel proud of that. Some of my dreams that I used to have are now my reality.” (Older woman)*

On the other hand, younger participants are more likely to say that they feel overwhelmed or afraid of making mistakes. For some participants, especially students, the insecurity is related to fears about the future, questioning whether they will be able to live up to the expectations they set for themselves or if the decisions they’re making are the right ones. Other younger participants also express trepidation over losing what they’ve managed to accomplish so far, as things still felt unsteady.

*“I feel uncertain about where my future is going, and what my path is, I guess.” (Latina)*

*“I think I already made a little mistake in my career and I realized I wanted to do something different... but I’m scared of making that mistake now.” (Younger woman)*

*“I’ve come very far in life. For me, it’s a mindset of if I do something wrong, I might lose what I’ve worked for, which is a scary thought. I’ve had to restart my life four or five times.” (Younger woman)*

This isn’t to say that all older participants feel proud or that all younger respondents express anxiety. In fact, across our younger groups, many participants balance their fears of failing with hope for what the future held for them.

*"I just started college and seeing all the things about debt and stuff, I'm wondering if college was the right option right out of high school, since a lot of my buddies started working right out of high school and are making pretty decent money. Just thinking about what my future is going to be and if I made the right choices. But I think I'm on the right track." (Younger man)*

### **Participants employ a wide range of tools to help cope with things, with self-reflection and meditation being the most common.**

Many unregistered voters have developed ways to deal with their uncertainty, anxiety, and fears by taking self-care actions. Activities range from self-affirmation, journaling, self-reflection, and meditation, which several participants across groups mention as a particularly helpful method.

Others said that they seek input from others. Some said they lean on people they trust – like a young woman who is expecting her first child and seeks advice from other parents in her family. People also mention that online forums, like Reddit, could often provide helpful information, and Google was also a popular answer.

*"I sit and meditate in silence, and I really like it. It feels like the one medicine for everything." (Younger woman)*

*"I do a lot of meditation... I meditate and I sit there and close my eyes, and I just breathe... I do my affirmations, and it makes me feel better, and I feel proud of myself..." (Older woman)*

*"I'm a big fan of researching things. Using forum boards and stuff like that to see how I can figure out what's going on with whatever I'm being uncertain about. I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia early last year and [Reddit] has been a godsend." (Latina)*

### **Many participants express a sense of detachment from their nearby communities.**

This lack of connection which stems from limited daily interactions with neighbors had many explanations. Some argue people spend more time online and less time outside, even acknowledging they themselves are more often than not trapped within their own bubbles. Others, particularly those with families, feel children in their neighborhoods don't play together much—particularly outside—leading to less of a community feeling. A few also mention minor conflicts as a reason not to interact with neighbors—like not picking up after their dogs or disagreements about condo management. Some also say this feeling of isolation has gotten worse with time and recall living in communities that felt more connected when they were younger.

*"It could be not necessarily the community that's so in their own bubble. It might be myself as well that's in a bubble." (older woman)*

*"Growing up, I feel like community was more of a thing than it is now. It's almost like everyone has their own house or their own stuff going on, and it's easy to become isolated." (Latino)*

*"My neighborhood has an HOA, and the members were pretty active there, and it got pretty hostile... It's just funny that it was such petty things that people are fighting over." (Younger man)*

However, several say they see their communities as made up of their friends and family, which garnered more positive reactions to community. Communities based on shared values and interests, and not just proximity, are more meaningful to them. Some younger participants see their college campus as their closest community.

### **Cultural differences and misunderstandings may add to feelings of alienation among people of color.**

Some Black and Latino participants voice unique difficulties and challenges they have experienced in their communities as people of color. One young Latina from Colombia shared about how she had faced discrimination and even sometimes struggled to make friends due to her accent. A younger woman in college whose family lives abroad discussed how cultural differences with peers makes it even harder to make friends on her campus. A young Black man who recently moved to a more rural town was surprised about the lack of awareness of Black History Month by a member of his community. Another Afro-Latina woman felt discriminated by Hispanics who assumed she did not speak Spanish due to her appearance.

*“I live in Miami... I think I speak English good, but sometimes people say, ‘you don’t speak English, like I don’t understand what you’re saying.’ So you prefer not to talk, not to open up.”* (Younger woman)

*“I was out the other day... in the grocery line... the person behind me is like, ‘What’s Black History Month?’ And I thought they were joking. She’s like: ‘Oh, I’ve never known. I thought it was just February, like I thought it was Valentine’s month.’”* (Younger man)

*“I am Latina, but I don’t look Latina. I don’t sound Latina... I have experienced discrimination in other ways with people speaking in front of me in Spanish and not realizing that I understand what they’re saying, I speak fluent Spanish.”* (Older woman)

*“Because I’m from a different country... it’s so hard for me to find someone here with my same mindset. So, it’s hard to fit in... that’s where you feel less connected. It’s like the closed-minded thing, culture differences and all of that.”* (Younger woman)

### **Local connection can come in many forms—helping a neighbor, celebrating one’s culture, supporting a local business, or enjoying the outdoors, arts, or farmers markets.**

Unregistered voters connect with their communities in very different ways, depending on their interests, availability, or even their stage in life. Many say they participate in local activities and cultural events put on by their communities and towns, such as fairs and concerts, “First Fridays”, or farmers’ markets. Some also say they try to support their communities by buying from local small businesses. At a more personal level, other participants indicate the way they connect is by being there for friends or neighbors, to just listen or to offer advice. Others also talk about making connections through small actions, such as waving and saying hello to a neighbor or helping someone carry their groceries. Participants also cite shared interests as an opportunity to meet people and form community, such as fitness classes, art classes, sports groups, and other hobbies.

*“The city has a lot of traditions. Right now, the month of February, we have festivals, where we celebrate Black history... there’s all kinds of events, music, art, speakers. There’s also a monthly gathering downtown, where the streets are shut down and all the restaurants and people are out celebrating.” (Older woman)*

*“I tend to spend a lot of time with my gym buddies and people that I’m close with at work that are my age, and we’ll do the same thing, you know. So, Sundays watch football together, grill out. We go to local competitions if there are any.” (Younger man)*

*“I would say there’s some farmers around us, and some farmers markets, and like local shops like butcher and different coffee shops that we try to visit as frequently as possible within reason, just to support the local community.” (Latino)*

*“I get to meet people in my CrossFit class. They have a run to help to collect funds for a foundation. I’m always down. And yeah, I always try to go to social events and try to connect with people.” (Younger woman)*

### **Helping others can also mean anything—moving furniture, sharing beauty tips, mentoring coworkers, teaching crochet, or translating.**

There are a variety of ways in which these participants help or receive help from others. A few mention volunteering for a wide range of organizations, from supporting single moms to distributing food or helping sick kids. Some participants also see their jobs as a way to help others, like one woman who mentioned she was the only notary in her community, or a Latina woman who is a mental health counselor, or an older woman who spoke about how proud she is about her job as an aesthetician so that she could help other women feel beautiful. Similarly, some participants see their positions in their jobs as an opportunity to mentor others, especially young adults, like a high school football coach or restaurant manager with high school students as employees. Several respondents also thought of sharing resources as helping others, such as one young man who talked about lending a hand or storage space for their neighbors’ construction projects. Although many participants are able to point to big actions, they also acknowledged the positive effect of small everyday actions.

*“I’m a mental health counselor. So just speaking to clients and giving back in that way.” (Latina)*

*“I’m an aesthetician, it’s nice that people value my opinion, I’m the one they can call on and being able to help another woman feel better about themselves with all that we go through as women.” (Older woman)*

*“You go for a walk, and you end up helping someone carry their couch into their basement or something. You know, just everybody in our neighborhood is pretty friendly.” (Younger man)*

*“There’s a city group and that they are trying to get into crocheting. So, once I kind of free some stuff off of my plate, I do want to go volunteer some of my time and teach.” (Younger woman)*

**Voter registration fails to capture the interest of the majority of our participants, who encounter a diverse array of obstacles in the process.**

When the conversation turned to registering to vote, unregistered participants provided a plethora of reasons for their reluctance to register to vote.

<p><b>Feeling uninformed:</b> The lack of information about candidates and politics is the most mentioned reason for not registering to vote. Many argue since they don't have enough information, they would not be able to make a good decision and therefore prefer to stay out of the process.</p>	<p><i>"I'm not up on my hind legs about any sort of issue. As far as politics go, I don't follow politics at all, so I really don't feel like I have the right to vote." (older woman)</i></p>
<p><b>Hatred of politics:</b> A few indicate they explicitly don't want to participate in a process they consider toxic. Whether it's the candidates, gridlock, the money in politics, or the process itself, the thought of current events and politics was deeply unappealing to many participants.</p>	<p><i>"I'm not interested in the candidates. I don't really get too into politics, but I don't think there's a good choice on either side, whichever way you lean, the candidates suck." (Younger man)</i></p>
<p><b>Skepticism about the process:</b> Many participants cast doubt on the fairness of the process and entertain the possibility that elections could be rigged. While some question whether votes are actually counted, a handful believe election outcomes are pre-determined by some set of groups or people manipulating the election results.</p>	<p><i>"Even if we vote, maybe they're playing with the numbers of votes or something...like somebody's already decided who's going to win right now. And we're all just sort of watching the election." (Younger woman)</i></p>
<p><b>Policy paralysis:</b> Some participants believe—no matter the outcome of an election—there won't be any real changes. For some, this stems from politicians not keeping promises. Others believe that the current polarization makes it impossible to get anything done. And a few consider politicians just incapable of bringing change to their communities.</p>	<p><i>"I've seen four Hispanic grandmas do more for the community than Democrats or Republicans, whatever kind of people." (Latino)</i></p>
<p><b>Logistical hurdles:</b> Most participants are unaware of what process you have to follow to register to vote. However, that does not seem to be their main reason to not register as they believe information is easy to find, either through searching Google, going to the library, or asking a friend or relative. Yet, some of those who went through the process found it tedious. One young man also complained about having to take time off to vote unlike in other countries.</p>	<p><i>"I tried to do it twice, but I got lazy. In Texas you can do it online, but then you have to download a form, and they have to sign it. And they have to scan it. And then email it. I'm like, it's too much." (Latina)</i></p>

<p><b>Worrying about jury duty:</b> Several participants across groups mention jury duty as a reason for not registering to vote. In fact, one older woman who was vocal about the importance of voting and making one’s voice heard explained that she is not registered to vote because she is disabled and would not be able to serve on a jury.</p>	<p><i>“It might be a myth, but I was always told that if you registered to vote you might be called for jury duty.” (Young man)</i></p>
<p><b>Apathy:</b> While many negative reasons and doubts were cited, another pervasive explanation from participants was that the outcome of an election just didn’t seem to have much of an impact on their lives with one older woman stating, <i>“I just try to live my life as happy as I can.”</i> Whether because they thought governmental gridlock would never lead to any meaningful change or that any decisions the government could make would never actually change their day-to-day life, the idea of just focusing on their own lives and what they can control is much more appealing.</p>	<p><i>“We don’t want to invest the time and energy to be a part of something that’s so divisive and half and half if we can’t be sure of the outcome. So, we’d rather just focus on the things that are going right in our lives and what we can control rather than taking the time to be a part of registering to vote or picking one or the other.” (Younger man)</i></p>



**Some believe elections are predetermined or manipulated by powerful entities and note a strong link between money and politics, which deepens their skepticism toward the electoral process.**

It's important we reiterate the alarming finding that some are not simply uninterested in or mistrustful of politics, but see elections as manipulated or even as a charade. Some of these participants wondered if a group of people who have an agenda are manipulating the process and the results for their self-interest. Who the people pulling the strings are is not clear, with most respondents starting with a vague "they," only to be narrowed down to some general groups. One participant cited conspiracy theories, mentioning the Illuminati, while others pointed to politicians or the government more broadly, the rich and powerful, the media, the freemasons, or the Electoral College. Manipulation could be campaign tactics—focusing on specific messages or communities—but for others manipulation meant a fake election "already decided" but held simply to trick voters into feeling they had a voice.

*"It's rigged, it's a scam. It's already predetermined, the president is just a face."  
(Older woman)*

*"I'll never know their names. Even if I did a deep dive into who owns the shell companies that own the shell companies that own everything, I'm not going to find their names. They're faceless, and they control everything. That's just how it is."  
(Younger woman)*

*"Pretty much, it feels like there's a puppet master that organizes all these things, all the manipulative tactics they have in the media, they have a way to sway the vote or change the votes after you voted. Feels like it's already been decided."  
(Younger woman)*

*I always kind of thought that outcome is already decided before. The electoral college, the masons, whoever has the most money, those are the decision makers, and not really the people. Are our votes even counted?  
(Older woman)*

Some believe it is people with power and money who are manipulating the process to obtain their desired outcome. Participants connected the extreme wealth corporations and CEOs have with advertising and media manipulation, discussing how those with money can further pursue wealth and other ambitions by manipulating "the masses" with money spent on advertisements for certain political figures. A few believe voting is just more impactful for people with money because the electoral result can have a bigger impact on their lives, through things like tax breaks or regulatory policy, than for people like them leaving them less incentivized to register and vote.

*"The election has already been decided? Yes, because once again, money controls everything. If you have enough money, you can control anything you want." (Younger woman)*

*"For some people it really matters 10 times more, because they have more to gain and more to lose. A lot of the rich people that you know, they may get taxed a ton of a lot more than we do, or they invest into these campaigns and stuff like that. It's going to matter 10 times more for those people than the common guy... Your version of taxes versus a millionaire's version of taxes is completely two different things." (Younger man)*

*"I feel like corporations and people with money, like the powers that be, are still going to be the powers that be and whoever is in that chair as President doesn't matter. All the same people who are pulling the strings are going to probably keep on pulling the strings." (Younger man)*

Few are willing to challenge the notion that their voices are trumped by those with money or power. Only a small handful offer a more optimistic tone saying with strength in numbers and collective action, voices like theirs could be heard. And only one young woman was willing to counter the conspiracies of secret groups playing puppet master as delusional.

*"Strength in numbers. Maybe not one person, but there's strength in numbers. Teamwork makes the dream work. When you band together, your voice is heard!" (Older woman)*

*"A lot of things in the world got changed from people coming together and actually using their voice to do something." (Younger woman)*

*"I know that some people think there's a select group of elites or the Illuminati, or just certain anonymous groups that are controlling the masses, but that's not really it. Those people are heavily deluded." (Younger woman)*

## Abortion, local issues, and influence from a relative or friend are the main drivers to vote.

These unregistered voters see little difference between registering to vote and actually voting. To them, these two processes are part of the same thing and registering to vote makes no sense unless you plan on voting. To the extent they considered voting, a few issues and tactics made participants more amenable to voting.

- **Abortion:** Some participants, particularly women, feel that abortion rights are under threat and admit that this could be an issue that might motivate them to vote. One young woman from Ohio discussed how Issue 1 was the only time she thought about voting, even if she did not end up voting.
- **Local issues:** Even though these participants were far more likely to think about national politics than local politics when discussing voting, a few indicated that they believe local issues could have a bigger impact in their lives and communities, such as school district decisions or zoning laws. Parents are more likely to pay attention to anything that impacts their children's education.
- **Social pressure:** A few mentioned that they have voted once at the behest of a friend or a family member. Those who did vote described the process as a continuous nagging from their friend or relative who felt strongly about voting either because they believed in one specific candidate or they were concerned about a specific issue, like school districts. Those who ended up voting said that getting them to vote required a lot of handholding by the person who was influencing them.

*"The only time I thought about voting was for the abortion bill that was proposed [in Ohio]. I didn't vote for that one either, clearly because I'm not registered, but I would have applied or registered to vote to solely vote for the abortion bill because I was highly against it."*  
(Younger woman)

*Yes, [abortion matters to me], but not enough to motivate me to vote."* (Younger woman)

*"There's probably more power in smaller communities to get who they want to be elected but I always forget about that. And I always just say presidential when I think of voting."*  
(Latino)

*"The first time I voted was a midterm and my sister and I were roommates. And I was not doing anything or really caring about anything at the time, but she just bugged me: come, vote with me, we're going together. So, I did it then. And then I've just been gradually less interested personally. But that time I was like, 'Okay, you know, whatever you say. It's really important to you. I'll come with you.'" (Younger man)*

### Ultimately, few seem moveable.

Most began resistant to the idea of registering to vote and voting itself and by the end of the group, few have changed their minds over the course of the discussion. It is worth noting that we did not test any specific message to move participants on this issue, but the conversation about voting mostly reinforced their initial skepticism and doubts about the process. That being said, our participants self-report they are not registered to vote, which likely makes them less available than the many people who overreport their registration but are not actually registered.

*“Do I have access? Absolutely. Will I be using it? Absolutely not.” (Younger woman)*

*“If I need to influence anyone, it’s the people around me. So, I just try to be a good person to the people around me and the people that I’m personally connected with. I’m not saying I would never, ever vote, but there’s nothing that’s ever driven me to feel like I have to do it.” (Older woman)*

*“I don’t think that there would be anything that really could convince me.” (Younger woman)*