

The Collapse of Meaning: The Rise of Political Nihilism in Generation Z, Post-Truth

Politics and Democratic Spectacle

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Abstract

Generation Z is among the most politically conscious yet institutionally distrustful generations in modern American history. While many young adults remain committed to social justice and democratic ideals, they also express deep cynicism and nihilism toward government, elections and political leadership. This study examines whether these attitudes reflect a broader condition of political nihilism, defined as the erosion of meaning, truth, and legitimacy within democratic politics. Grounded in the theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, and Jean Baudrillard, this project analyzes how post-truth politics, hyper-mediated spectacle, and declining institutional trust shaped Generation Z's political socialization. Using a mixed-methods approach combining survey data and qualitative responses, findings reveal a generation that supports democracy in principle while doubting its effectiveness. Participants frequently described politics as corrupt, performative, divisive and disconnected from ordinary citizens. However, some respondents transformed this disillusionment into activism and demands for structural reform rather than total disengagement. These findings suggest that Generation Z's skepticism should not be interpreted simply as apathy, but a rational response to sustained institutional instability and erosion of political meaning. Understanding this generational outlook is essential for evaluating the future resilience and legitimacy of American democracy.

Introduction

Generation Z represents a striking paradox within contemporary American political life, emerging as one of the most socially conscious and digitally engaged generations in recent history while simultaneously displaying deep disengagement from traditional forms of civic and political participation, including institutional trust, voting, and confidence in democratic governance (CIRCLE, 2025). Born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, Generation Z has come of age amid a cascade of horribly destabilizing events, including the aftermath of the Great Recession, intensifying climate change, a global pandemic, mass racial justice mobilization and escalating partisan polarization. These conditions have fundamentally shaped Generation Z's political consciousness, producing a generation defined by both heightened political awareness and profound skepticism toward the legitimacy, stability, and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

While scholars have extensively analyzed democratic backsliding (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018) (CIRCLE 2025) (Brady & Kent 2022), declining institutional trust, affective polarization, and the rise of post-truth politics (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018) (CIRCLE 2025) (Brady & Kent 2022), existing literature often treats these phenomena as discrete crises rather than interconnected conditions shaping generational political consciousness. Research on Generation Z frequently frames youth disengagement through the lenses of apathy, polarization (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), civic decline (Pew Research Center 2024), or digital fragmentation, yet insufficient attention has been given to how prolonged exposure to institutional instability and epistemic breakdown produces a deeper crisis of political meaning itself. This study intervenes within that gap conceptualizing Generation Z's political distrust not merely as declining civic participation,

but as a historically situated form of political nihilism rooted in the erosion of democratic legitimacy, the collapse of shared truth frameworks, and the transformation of politics into mediated spectacle (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018) (Arendt 1968) (Baudrillard 1981).

More specifically, this study contributes to existing literature in three primary ways. First, it synthesizes political philosophy and empirical political science by integrating Nietzsche's theory of nihilism (Nietzsche 1883), Hannah Arendt's analysis of truth and politics (Arendt 1968), and Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1981) with contemporary scholarship on democratic erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018) and youth political behavior (Pew Research Center 2024). Second, it expands existing understandings of youth disengagement by reframing cynicism and distrust not as evidence of generational apathy, but as rational responses to sustained institutional destabilization during a formative period of political socialization (Neundorf & Smets 2017). Third, this thesis introduces a conceptual distinction between passive and active nihilism, arguing that Generation Z's disillusionment does not simply produce withdrawal from politics, but may also generate alternative forms of decentralized political engagement, digital mobilization, and collective resistance outside traditional institutional frameworks.

For the purposes of this study, political nihilism is the belief that political institutions, leaders, and democratic processes lack genuine meaning, legitimacy, or moral authority, leading to deep distrust, cynicism, and the perception that political participation is ultimately ineffective or meaningless. Unlike conventional political disengagement, political nihilism reflects a deeper ontological and epistemological rupture in which citizens no longer perceive existing systems as capable of producing coherent truth, accountability, or substantive representation. In this

framework, distrust becomes more than dissatisfaction with governance, it becomes a crisis of political meaning itself.

This cohort of youth have a passive appreciation of democracy, but lack a higher level of trust within political and civic institutions (CIRCLE 2025). The current condition has led many young people to believe that government is increasingly controlled by actors more concerned with power than preserving democratic norms, causing voting to feel like choosing the “lesser of two evils” and fostering disillusionment and distrust.

To further conceptualize this, the philosophical tradition of nihilism has materialized. Friedrich Nietzsche famously defined nihilism as the moment when “the highest values devalue themselves” (Nietzsche 1883), describing a historical condition in which previously authoritative moral frameworks collapse under their own contradictions. In political terms, this collapse emerges when democratic institutions continue to exist formally, yet increasingly fail to embody the values that once sustained public faith in them.

Young Americans considerably support democracy as a governmental framework, but are overall less confident about it in practice because of the constant blurring of moral institutional norms, politics as a performance, and the lack of accountability being held for politicians and governmental officials (CIRCLE 2025). In addition to this, the lower civic development being expressed within them can be linked to the detachment to government and democracy as a whole. Gen Z feels as if they do not have the tools or ability in a political system, devaluing it altogether (CIRCLE 2025). In a political context, nihilism does not simply denote apathy, rather, it signals a deeper erosion of faith in the meaningfulness of norms, institutions, and democratic authority itself. When citizens perceive that values such as truth, rule of law, or institutional

accountability no longer constrain power, nihilism emerges as a rational response to perceived incoherence.

While these structural conditions are significant for Generation Z, the presidency of Donald J. Trump marks a particularly defining moment in Generation Z's political socialization. Hyman (1959) has defined political socialization as "learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal position as mediated through various agencies of society." This process exemplifies in the impressionable years, and how earlier life experiences are considered to form the basis for political attitudes, including political engagement, and overall political behaviors (Neundorf & Smets 2017). This starts traditionally between the ages of 17 and 25 (Neundorf & Smets, 2017). Trump's tenure, from 2016 to 2020 and his subsequent return to presidency in 2024, coincided directly with the period in which many members of Generation Z were forming durable political identities. Generation Z witnessed a sustained challenge to democratic norms, escalating polarization, attacks on electoral legitimacy, the normalization of misinformation, and high visibility norm violations. Trump's strategy of creating politics as entertainment spectacle has further blurred the lines into what is truth or fallacy. Political discourse became saturated with strategic outrage and performative conflict. For a generation entering civic life, politics appeared less as a domain of principled deliberation and more as an arena of instability, theatricality and epistemic breakdown.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of truth and politics further illuminates this harrowing phenomenon. Arendt argues that factual truth functions as a stabilizing element within democratic life, and that its systemic distortion undermines the conditions necessary for collective judgement. Arendt argues that truth and politics exist in persistent tension (Arendt, 1968), a condition further

intensified by the spectacle driven and entertainment oriented politics of the post-truth era. When political actors deliberately erode shared reality, public discourse shifts from contesting interpretations of facts to contesting the existence of facts altogether. The resulting epistemic instability produces a harsh climate in which citizens struggle to distinguish governance from manipulation. For Generation Z, whose political awareness developed in an environment of constant claims of “fake news,” alternative facts, and algorithmic amplification, this destabilization of shared truth likely deepened perceptions that politics lacks substantive grounding.

Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and hyperreality extends this diagnosis into the media sphere. Baudrillard contends that in advanced media societies, representation precedes and replaces reality, political life becomes a spectacle in which performance eclipses policy substance. With the modern day implosion of media, especially being weaponized within the Trump administration, it blurs the lines between truth and falsehood, with fake news being blasted out to the masses (Baudrillard 1981). The Trump era exemplified this dynamic, as branding, viral communication, and televised conflict that often overshadowed institutional procedure. In such a hyperreal environment, politics becomes indistinguishable from entertainment, and governance is reframed as an ongoing media event rather than a deliberative process. Baudrillard’s notion of “Disneyland politics” captures this transformation of governance into entertainment spectacle, obscuring the boundary between political reality and mediated simulation (Baudrillard 1981). For Gen Z, raised in digital ecosystems saturated by spectacle, the boundary between democratic practice and theatrical performance may appear permanently blurred.

Taken together, Nietzsche's value collapse, Arendt's epistemic destabilization and Baudrillard's hyperreality provide a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary political nihilism. This paper argues that the convergence of these conditions during Gen Z's formative political years intensified a historically grounded form of political nihilism. Rather than framing Gen Z's skepticism as apathy or fragility, this study conceptualizes it as a rational response to sustained institutional destabilization and epistemic breakdown. The central thesis of this paper is that the post-truth era accelerated political nihilism among Generation Z by eroding perceived institutional legitimacy, destabilizing shared truth claims, and collapsing democratic governance into spectacle during a critical period of political socialization. The study seeks to determine whether Generation Z's political disillusionment reflects passive resignation, active critique, or a structural transformation in democratic legitimacy through a mixed methods design, including an IRB approved survey and analysis of trends and existing literature. Ultimately, this research situates Gen Z's political nihilism not as a fleeting generational mood but as an index of deeper institutional instability within American democracy. If nihilism signals the collapse of belief in the meaningfulness of political authority, then the generational attitudes explored here may represent not a deviation from democratic norms, but a warning about their condition.

Literature Review

Nietzsche, Nihilism, and Generation Z

Nihilism originates from Freiderich Nietzsche's work, *The Will to Power*, in which he defines "that the highest values devalue themselves" (Nietzsche, 1883). To further explore this point, it

emphasizes nihilism as the point in which traditional structures, including government and religion collapse because of the valuelessness society puts on them. Nihilism is reached when society seeks out these specific institutions to protect, but they simply are not there, causing the immense feeling of meaninglessness. This forms the nihilistic consequence, which is the belief in valuelessness that is a consequence of moral evaluation (Nietzsche 1883). The moral evaluation method includes critiquing traditional value systems (Nietzsche 1883), which is a philosophical foundation for why Gen Z perceives politics as hollow. So in essence, nihilism is the recognition of the long waste of strength and lack of any opportunity to recover (Nietzsche 1883), and is the driving philosophical framework to explain Generation Z's political attitude. Political nihilism is the feeling when the people have given up strength due to lack of faith in their "trusted" institutions because of the corruption, deception and lies that the Trump Era has brought upon them. Nihilism is not the end all be all, but it is a transitional stage (Nietzsche, 1883) where society has the opportunity to form new institutions based on the lack of the perceived power in the current ones. He defines nihilism as ambiguous; as passive nihilism, resignation, despair and apathy, the belief that nothing matters, and active nihilism, the destructive, creative force that seeks to overturn old values and create new ones (Nietzsche 1883). Gen Z's behavior is dialectical, not monolithic. Even though many disengage from traditional politics, others transform disillusionment into innovation, fully embodying Nietzsche's active nihilism. With this active nihilism, it forms creative destruction to clear the ground for new values. The Trump Era has challenged the legitimacy of core democratic institutions and turned politics as a spectacle causing the reevaluation of all values, rendering Gen Z into a state of peril.

The Erosion of Truth in Democracy

Through this destruction of truth seen during the Trump Presidency, Hanna Arendt has warned that these conditions can create conditions for authoritarianism (Arendt 1968). Arendt further expresses that truth and politics are not on good terms with each other, and lies are necessary and used as tools for the politician's advancement (Arendt 1968). In essence, she notions that the very nature of politics and truth cannot coexist with the factual truth without corrupting one another (Arendt 1968). She uses this method of questioning to challenge the audience to think about whether political life can actually ever be fully transparent and reality-based, or if the rational truth will always be sacrificed to the demands of persuasion and control (Arendt 1968). This destruction of a shared reality is the beginning of political nihilism, when people stop believing that the truth even matters. Donald Trump's rise normalized what Arendt would call "organized lying" (Arendt 1968). By Trump's repeated falsehoods including his statements of "fake news," "stolen election," and "enemy of the people," he misled the public, undermining the fine line between truth and fallacy. This misinformation overwhelms attention, breeds cynicism and makes every narrative seem unbelievable. Arendt's power and truth conflict reappears in the Trump Era's "post-truth" politics, with the idea that emotional appeal and loyalty outweigh factual accuracy. In Generation Z, this nihilism is not apathy, it is extensive exhaustion from the falsehoods being constantly thrown at them. When the truth feels pointless and the politics feel fake and performative, people tend to disengage and find meaningless in once meaningful institutions. The Trump era intensified this nihilistic condition because of the collapse of factual truth, creating politics as a spectacle followed by a large wave of cynicism and the disillusionment with democracy and institutions.

Hyperreality and Political Spectacle

In Jean Baudrillard's, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (1981), he brings up the idea that simulation is the generation of models of a real origin or reality, creating a hyperreal version (Baudrillard 1981). The real no longer has to be rational, or true, and this simulation is created by the dissolution of all ideas, not in essence pretending, but masking reality (Baudrillard 1981). This precession of simulacra is the age of mass media, where representations come before reality, shaping it rather than reflecting it (Baudrillard 1981). Trump has mastered this exact logic by creating his media persona and constant spectacle (e.g., rallies, tweets, branding), materializing a political reality rather than responding to it. Trump Era politics is all about masking the reality of the circumstances, instead of being transparent and illusive with the public. In addition, Baudrillard makes a point about the implosion of meaning in the media, where information overload leads to the collapse of meaning and truth becomes indistinguishable (Baudrillard 1981). Trump's contradictory statements and misinformation further exemplify this collapse, teaching audiences that truth itself is irrelevant and only perception truly matters.

Baudrillard also hits a strong point on politics as a simulation. He predicted a world where politics become performance, and leaders act as simulations of power without substance (Baudrillard, 1981). Trump personifies himself as a simulacrum of leadership, turning governance into entertainment, and transforming the presidency into a stage managed show, an echo of "disneyland" politics (Baudrillard 1981), where illusion hides the absence of reality. Furthering this, Baudrillard focuses on hyperreality and disillusionment, where people live inside constructed truths (Baudrillard 1981). For Gen Z in particular, they are raised inside social media ecosystems where Trump's political performances are constantly circulating the media. This caused political nihilism, where nothing is authentic or trustworthy.

Democratic Backsliding and the Disintegrating of Institutional Legitimacy

How Democracies Die by Levitsky and Ziblatt brings a methodological approach to the modern day process of democracies dying from within. They examine the questions of how modern democracies die and what role do elected leaders and political parties play in democratic backsliding while indicating key warning signs that a democracy is in decline. They argue that democracies today most often die from within, through the gradual weakening of democratic norms and institutions by elected leaders who use legal mechanisms to consolidate power (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). There is no single movement to see the death of democracy, and democracy's erosion is imperceptible (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). The attempts to subvert democracy are technically "legal" and approved by legislature or accepted by courts (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), which leads to the slippery slope of authoritarianism that we see in the post-truth era. Extremist demagogues emerge from time to time in all societies, even in healthy democracies like the United States (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Donald Trump's victory was made possible not only by public disaffection but by the Republican Party's failure to keep an extremist demagogue within its own ranks from gaining the nomination (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018) showing that without recognizing the warning signs, a healthy democracy can be destroyed from within.

Levitsky and Ziblatt have defined 4 sets of behavioral warning signs that can help recognize an authoritarian when they arise. These include; 1. Rejects in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2. Denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3. Tolerates or encourages violence and 4. Indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). In addition to these warning signs, they have also defined two essential informal

norms that sustain democracy which include mutual toleration and institutional forbearance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Mutual toleration is shown in accepting political rivals as legitimate, and institutional forbearance is exercising restraint in the use of legal powers. When these norms erode, institutions can remain formally intact, elections occur, courts still function, but democracy's spirit dies from within.

The weakening of our democratic norms are rooted in extreme partisan polarization (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Partisan polarization shows how extreme division erodes shared reality and trust in institutions, accelerating Gen Z's sense that politics is empty, performative and incapable of delivering meaningful change. Trump and his allies have tested the limits of democratic institutions by attacking the press, judiciary and electoral system, while partisan polarization prevented effective checks on executive power. When institutional guardrails fail because of the lack of enforcing accountability, this creates the conditions for widespread disillusionment. Trump's norm-breaking and the system's inability to respond reinforce Gen Z's sense that politics are hollow, manipulated and incapable of protecting democratic truth or legitimacy. The health of democracy depends less on laws than on shared norms of respect, trust and restraint, values that, once lost, are difficult to restore.

The loss of public trust in government and nihilistic attitudes are imminent in recent statistics shown in the past few years. The Pew Research Center has done a report on *Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024*, and has reported that the trust in government is near historic lows. In May 2024, 22% of Americans say they trust the government to do what is right, and with more key words like "just about always," it drops to 2% or "most of the time" is 21%. In 2023, 16% of people say they trust the government (Pew Research Center, 2024). This shows that the trust in

government is because of political polarization, scandals, perceived government ineffectiveness and misinformation. The terrifying consequence of the administration is at hand, and rebuilding trust needs to be a priority to restore fairness, competence, transparency and shared purpose.

Even though these studies show major political disillusionment, Gen Z is involved in different forms of activism, such as social movements, climate protests, and social media engagement that go beyond traditional politics.

The main focus of political nihilism is to see the rapid decline of trust in notoriously implemented institutions. *Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions*, by Henry E. Brady and Thomas B. Kent look into this substantial decline. Confidence in all major U.S institutions have declined dramatically since the 1970s, accompanied by an increase in partisan polarization in how Americans perceive and trust these institutions. Specific institutional failures and events (Brady & Kent 2022) damaged public confidence in individual institutions. In addition, broad nonpartisan forces (e.g., economic inequality, ethnic diversity) have also produced an overall decline in trust in almost all institutions (Brady & Kent 2022). Political nihilism did not just appear out of thin air, but has appeared through the confidence in institutions declining and polarization ever increasing. The Trump or post-truth era has exacerbated Gen Z's attitudes, causing this wave of meaninglessness. The comparative institutional framework of this study through categorizations of media, religion, government and education help interpret which institutions Gen Z distrust the most, creating a continuity of nihilism between their work and this research project. This self-reinforcing cycle of distrust in which Americans interpret institutional legitimacy through partisan lenses overall undermines democracy's stability and makes collective problem solving increasingly difficult.

Growing skepticism accounts for the general trend toward declining confidence in institutions (Brady & Kent 2022), which as Nietzsche defines skepticism as a large component of nihilism. The longitudinal data on declining trust helps quantify the historical erosion of institutional legitimacy that Nietzsche, Arendt and Baudrillard theorize as the collapse of shared meaning in the post-truth era.

Methodology

This study is formulated through a mixed methods research design, adding quantitative and qualitative approaches to further examine the ever increasing rate of political nihilism among Generation Z during the Trump era. This design specifically illustrates the measurable levels of institutional trust and political engagement as well as the subjective or quantitative meanings of Gen Z, and how they personally attach to politics, truth and democracy. In addition, this study acknowledges that political nihilism can not be understood just through survey metrics, The research conceptualizes that this knowledge is socially constructed through generational experience and media discourse around politics and the generations previous. With this mixed methods design, it integrates the subjective meanings of the structures of nihilism with quantifiable indicators of institutional trust and disengagement. This aims to interpret and capture how Generation Z thoroughly internalized the erosion of truth and legitimacy during the Trump Presidency.

Research Design:

A mixed-methods design was used, combining Quantitative survey data, to further operationalize constructs such as political trust, apathy and perceived meaninglessness and Qualitative question analysis to explore the existential and emotional responses towards politics, democracy and governance. In addition, this research is framed through empirical data, philosophical frameworks derived from Nietzsche, Arendt and Baudrillard and through a political sociological lens to analyze the levels of nihilism and political opinions of Generation Z. The core research instrument, the *Political Views of Generation Z* survey was developed in Google Forms and validated through the IRB. The survey comprises 24 Likert-scale questions and 2 open-ended questions divided into three parts:

1. *Demographic Variables:* Age, gender, ethnicity, education level, employment status and political orientation
2. *Quantitative Scale Section:* Items adapted from established measures of political efficacy (e.g., “*I feel that people like me can influence what government does*”), institutional trust (“*I trust the president to represent the needs of ordinary people*”) and nihilistic disillusionment (“*All political institutions are corrupt, no matter who is in power,*” “*Truth no longer matters in politics; whoever is louder wins*”).
3. *Qualitative Section:* Two short-answer questions; “*How has recent U.S. politics influenced the way you view government and democracy?*” and “*When you think about the future of American democracy, do you feel hopeful, indifferent, or hopeless, and why?*” This captures the interpretive meaning and emotional orientation that Generation Z has within politics during the Trump Era.

The study uses a convenience hybrid sampling method, targeting individuals aged 18-25, consistent with the definitions of Generation Z, and who have been politically socialized and active during this era of politics. Participants were recruited via social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Discord) and academic networks. This approach was to make sure that the demographic was most shaped by the Trump Era's instability. Recruitment materials framed the survey as an exploration of *"how young adults interpret the meaning of democracy in the current era,"* not disclosing the purpose of measuring political nihilism. All the participation was voluntary and anonymous, consistent with IRB minimal-risk research classification. Participants accessed the survey through a secure Google Form link. Before proceeding, they viewed an informed consent statement clarifying purpose, risks, anonymity and withdrawal rights. No personal identifiers (names, emails, IP addresses) were collected. Responses were automatically recorded in a password-protected dataset. Findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis will be triangulated through theoretical frameworks including Nietzschean nihilism (*"the highest values devalue themselves"*), Arendt's truth and politics (*decay of factual reality as precondition for authoritarianism, and if truth and politics are fundamentally opposed*) and Baudrillard's hyperreality (*politics as simulation rather than substance*). This philosophical synthesis will illustrate how Gen Z's empirical disillusionment maps onto philosophical structures of modern nihilism.

Ethical Safeguards

This project meets the IRB self-exempt study criteria for educational research involving anonymous survey data. It aligns with IRB documentation because it involves voluntary

participation, no collection of identifiers, data encrypted on secure university storage and only aggregate results reported in publications. Participants experience no more than minimal psychological risk, as questions subject ordinary political attitudes rather than personal trauma.

Limitations

While interpretive depth is on the forefront, generalizability is overall limited by self-selection bias and online sampling. In addition, “Trump-Era Nihilism” cannot be isolated from overall phenomena such as the COVID-19 Pandemic, climate anxiety, economic factors, etc. Yet this methodological hybrid does comprise a multidimensional picture of existential political disengagement that further enriches both political sociology and contemporary philosophy.

By combining quantitative measures of institutional trust with qualitative accounts of meaning collapse and through a political sociological and contemporary philosophical lens, this establishes political nihilism as both a measurable condition and lived experience. This further bridges political science and philosophy, demonstrating how a generation's disenchantment with democracy can be empirically traced and theoretically interpreted through post-truth modernity.

Results

The survey was conducted from October 14th 2025 to February 12, 2026. The sample consists of 137 respondents. Ages range from 18 to 27, with roughly 86.3% clustered between ages 20-23, indicating a strongly college-aged cohort. The gender distribution skews female, with women

comprising 51.5% of respondents, men 45.4%, and gender-diverse identities (non-binary, transgender, genderqueer, gender non-conforming) representing roughly 5.2%.

Racially, the sample is heterogeneous, with 60.2% identify as White/European descent, 30.6% as Hispanic/Latino, 14.3% as Asian/Asian American, with smaller but meaningful representation from Black/African American 3.1%, Middle Eastern/North African 7.1%, Native American/Alaska Native (3.1%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2%), and multiracial respondents (10.2%) (many participants selected multiple identities).

Educational attainment reflects the university-based and social media context: 44.3% report “some college” or currently completing a bachelor’s degree, 26.8% hold a bachelor’s degree, 10.3% hold an associate degree, and a small minority (1%) report a master’s degree or only a high school diploma/GED (8.2%). Employment status is mixed, with 39.2% identifying primarily as students, 25.8% employed part-time, 22.7% employed full time, and a small subset unemployed (4.1%) or not seeking work (2.1%)

Politically, the sample demonstrates substantial ideological dispersion. 34.6% identify as liberal or very liberal/progressive, 24.5% as moderate/centrist, 20.4% as conservative or very conservative, and socialist (7.1%), libertarian (3.1%), leftist (1%), or hybrid ideological categories, with a small minority identifying as apolitical (4.1%). No single ideological bloc dominates the sample. While liberals and moderates slightly outnumber conservatives, the distribution reflects ideological pluralism rather than partisan homogeneity. This demographic and political composition situates the sample as a racially diverse, predominantly college-affiliated segment of Generation Z, characterized by broad ideological range and transitional life-stage positioning between education and workforce integration. Although not

nationally representative, the sample captures a cross-section of politically varied young adults navigating higher education and early adulthood during a period of intensified institutional polarization.

Likert Scale Questions

The sample of Generation Z that was used for this survey had some very profound but expected results. Through this framework of political nihilism, I used questions to measure political mistrust, institutional disillusionment, and overall feelings of nihilism in the current political climate. Using the measurement of 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree,” I was able to dive deeper into the opinions of this cohort.

I asked the question of “*I trust the president to represent the needs of ordinary people.*” 60.8% of respondents answered 1, which shows a strong disdain for the president. The democratic norms of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance have eroded to the point that the people can not even trust the president to do his job, by representing the average working man. To really dive into the disdain and political disillusionment that is plaguing Generation Z, 48.5% of respondents reported a 5 for “*Most politicians care about power more than they care about the public good.*” The accumulation of power by politicians has caused a fracture in the confidence in government that is essential to combat political nihilism. As these distortions accumulate, they generate a pervasive sense of cynicism, which is identified as a loss of confidence not only in specific leaders or institutions, but in the very possibility of truthful political discourse. This is where the connection to political nihilism becomes critical. If democratic legitimacy requires a shared commitment to truth, accountability, and good faith disagreement, then the erosion of

these commitments transforms democracy into a hollow procedural shell, functioning formally, but lacking substantive meaning.

The strategic repetition of emotionally charged language to create belief, reinforce identity, and normalize a narrative, regardless of factual accuracy, has conditioned Generation Z to have a loss of faith within previously trusted institutions. When asked “*The way politics is covered on social media makes it hard to know what is real,*” 51% answered a 5 on the scale, and 0% answered 1.

This blatant distortion and disregard for the truth is a central mechanism of political nihilism.

The ambiguity of truth in social media environments is crucial to this wave of political nihilism because it transforms skepticism into epistemic paralysis, where citizens no longer contest reality but abandon the possibility of knowing it altogether.

Emphasizing the spectacle that is now the United States Government is precisely what generates nihilism. When asked “*Politics in the U.S sometimes feels more like entertainment or spectacle than serious governing,*” 53.1% answered 5, or strongly agree. With this specific statistic, this is suggesting a perceived collapse of politics as a serious, truth-oriented governing process into a spectacle driven system. When politics is experienced as entertainment, policy becomes secondary to performance, leaders are judged on charisma, virality and conflict, and outcomes overall feel disconnected from deliberation. This has a harrowing, nihilistic effect. If politics is just a show, then it has no real substance or meaning. In this sense, nihilism emerges not from disbelief in specific claims, but from a deeper ontological uncertainty about whether politics corresponds to anything real at all. The confusion between medium and message produces a recursive loop in which political meaning is constantly generated, circulated, and consumed without ever stabilizing. Consequently, citizens are left in a state of epistemic suspension, unable

to fully believe, but also unable to definitively reject, leading to disengagement, cynicism, or ironic participation.

Short Answer Responses

When asked the first question, “*In your own words, how has recent U.S. politics influenced the way you view government and democracy,*” there was a massive empirical window that showed the lived structure of political nihilism. This revealed a multi-layered collapse of meaning, truth and democratic legitimacy. What is striking is the consistency with which respondents, across ideological divides, articulate politics as fundamentally hollow, performative, and detached from any substantive grounding.

A central pattern that emerges is the widespread perception of politics as spectacle rather than governance. Respondents repeatedly describe political life as a “reality tv show,” a “spectacle,” or “chaotic performance rather than principles,” with one stating plainly that “politics feels more like sports teams” and another that “modern politics are a spectacle meant to distract.” This language is not just metaphorical, it reflects a deeper experiential shift in which politics is consumed as entertainment rather than engaged as a deliberative process. The responses that say the government is a “facade” or “a manipulation contest... a buy in to the highest bidder” further reinforces the idea that what is being perceived is not distorted reality, but a system in which distinction between reality and simulation has collapsed entirely.

Closely tied to this is an overwhelming sense of epistemic instability. Respondents frequently emphasize that “there’s fake news,” that “social media can make something look like it’s not,” and that “it’s hard to know what is real.” One participant notes that “the hype and sensationalism makes learning about US politics feel like a waste of time,” while another states, “I find it

difficult to believe any information that comes from the government.” These statements go beyond distrust, they reflect what can be conceptualized as epistemic exhaustion, where the sheer volume of conflicting narratives produces disengagement rather than critical evaluation.

This epistemic breakdown feeds directly into a broader perception of structural corruption and elite domination, which appears with remarkable frequency across responses. Participants assert that “those in charge have an agenda that will only benefit the rich and powerful,” that “it’s all a cash grab,” and that “government has all the power while they commercialize democracy.”

Others go further, claiming that “the system is rigged,” “nothing ordinary people do matters,” and “voting does little to nothing in determining the outcome.” This language reflects a shift from dissatisfaction to perceived systemic inevitability, a hallmark of nihilistic reasoning.

Democracy is not simply flawed, it is interpreted as structurally incapable of representing the public will, thereby stripping participation of meaning.

Notably, this sense of meaninglessness often manifests as emotional disorientation, with respondents expressing statements such as “pure distrust and stress,” “I feel hopeless,” and “I’ve become more distrusting of the government.” Others describe feeling “less represented,” “embarrassed,” or “worried about the future of democracy,” while some adopt a more absolute stance, asserting that “democracy is a slowly dying concept” or even that “it is no longer a democracy... it is an oligarchy.” These statements illustrate that nihilism is not merely cognitive but deeply affective, shaping how individuals emotionally relate to political life.

At the same time, several responses reveal the persistence of active nihilism, in which disillusionment becomes a catalyst for critique or potential transformation. For instance, one respondent acknowledges that while politics feels “rigged,” “the American system allows for

change,” emphasizing that “the people do have a voice... it’s just about getting them to use it.” Another argues for a “push toward independent representatives” and a “step away from political parties,” suggesting not resignation but a reimagining of political structure. Similarly, expressions such as “I feel more empowered to fight for the rights of myself and the people around me” indicate that, for some, disillusionment produces not withdrawal but intensified engagement. This duality reinforces the Nietzschean framework in which nihilism is not a static condition but a transitional stage between the collapse of old values and the creation of new ones.

Another critical dimension evident in the responses is the perception that democratic institutions themselves are eroding. Participants note that “checks and balances... don’t hold as much weight as they used to,” that the “presidential role is becoming more all-encompassing,” and that “laws and standards are disregarded.” Others highlight concerns about “gerrymandering,” “polarization,” and the politicization of the Supreme Court, suggesting a growing awareness that institutional safeguards are weakening. These observations demonstrate that perceptions of democratic decline are not abstract but grounded in concrete institutional developments, further reinforcing the sense that democratic legitimacy is fracturing.

Perhaps most revealing, however, is the convergence of these themes into a broader perception that politics lacks moral coherence altogether. Statements such as “nobody has any morals,” “it’s all bullshit,” and “the government doesn’t care about their people” reflect not just distrust, but a belief that the ethical foundations of governance have collapsed. When politics is perceived as simultaneously corrupt, performative, and epistemically unstable, it ceases to function as a meaningful domain of collective life.

Importantly, these attitudes are not confined to a single ideological perspective. Responses range from critiques of corporate influence and threats to minority rights to concerns about media bias, immigration, and cultural decline. Yet despite these differences, the underlying structure remains consistent, with a shared perception that politics is manipulated, untrustworthy, and disconnected from ordinary people. This cross-ideological convergence is critical, as it suggests that political nihilism is not reducible to partisan dissatisfaction but reflects a deeper structural condition within contemporary democracy.

The second qualitative question, “*When you think about the future of American democracy, do you feel hopeful, indifferent, or hopeless and why?*” offers a critical lens into what can be conceptualized as temporal political nihilism, defined as the projection of present institutional distrust into expectations about the future. Rather than producing a clear distribution of optimism or pessimism, the responses reveal a fractured and internally contradictory temporal consciousness, in which hope, indifference, and despair coexist and frequently overlap. This suggests that attitudes toward the future of American democracy are not fixed positions, but rather reflect a deeper instability in how individuals interpret political trajectory, institutional durability, and the possibility of democratic continuity.

A feature of the responses is the extent to which hopelessness is framed not as a reaction to temporary political conditions, but as a reflection of structural inevitability. Many respondents express the belief that power is fundamentally concentrated and insulated from public influence, noting that “the top 1% ultimately control” and that “politicians only care about money and power.” Others extend this further, arguing that “the people in charge will continue to stay in control till we have no democracy left,” or that “all individual lives are affected by decisions

made far beyond our control.” Such statements indicate a shift from dissatisfaction to fatalism, where democratic processes are perceived as predetermined rather than participatory.

Respondents describe a reality in which “democratic institutions are being deconstructed,” “this is the end of democracy,” or the United States exhibits, “all the signs of a failing empire.” Others express this more viscerally, stating that “we are completely fucked as a nation,” that “we are doomed,” or that “it is too late.” These responses reflect not only pessimism, but a perception of historical finality, in which the future is imagined as a continuation of decline rather than a site of possibility. In this sense, nihilism becomes temporal, it is not simply that the present lacks meaning, but that the future itself is stripped of transformative potential.

At the same time, many respondents do not fully embrace this fatalism, instead expressing a profound sense of uncertainty and fluctuation. Responses such as “I’m unsure... sometimes I’m hopeful and sometimes I’m hesitant,” “depends on the day,” or “I don’t really know what to think” suggest that the future is experienced as fundamentally indeterminate. This instability is not merely indecisiveness, it reflects an underlying inability to construct a coherent narrative about political trajectory. When respondents note that their outlook “depends on what is pushed through the government” or “what gets passed on the local or national level,” they reveal a perception of politics as unpredictable and opaque, further complicating any attempt to form stable expectations.

In some cases, this uncertainty gives way to catastrophic imagination, where the future is envisioned in explicitly apocalyptic terms. Respondents describe scenarios in which “the United States will burn to the ground,” “democracy will devolve into “a dictatorship,” or the country will resemble “any other 3rd world country.” Others emphasize irreversible loss, asserting that

“the America I grew up in is gone” or that “nothing will be the same.” These narratives suggest that political instability is not perceived as cyclical or correctable, but as a linear progression toward collapse. The intensity of this language reflects the extent to which crisis has been internalized as a defining feature of political life, shaping expectations of the future accordingly. Alongside despair and catastrophic projection, a notable portion of respondents articulate indifference, often grounded in a perceived lack of agency. Statements such as “indifferent because I have little influence,” “indifferent... rich people win all the time,” or “it’s not my biggest priority” indicate a form of disengagement that is less about apathy than about resignation. In this context, indifference functions as a rational adaptation to a system perceived as unresponsive or unchangeable. Rather than investing emotional or cognitive energy into a process that appears predetermined, individuals withdraw, framing disengagement as a pragmatic response to structural constraints embodying the essence of nihilism.

Despite the prevalence of hopelessness and indifference, the responses also reveal the persistence of conditional and often fragile forms of hope, though these are rarely grounded in confidence in political institutions themselves. Instead, hope is frequently displaced onto society, particularly younger generations and collective action. Respondents express beliefs that “people are starting to wake up,” that “my generation will become more active,” and that “one voice can make a difference.” Others emphasize the importance of “unity, boycotts, marches, advocacy,” suggesting that meaningful change may emerge not from formal political structures but from grassroots engagement. These responses indicate that while distrust in institutions is widespread, many respondents have not abandoned political participation altogether. Instead, political hope

often appeared redirected away from institutions themselves and toward collective action or social movements.

In many cases, this hope coexists directly with despair, producing a dialectical orientation in which respondents simultaneously affirm and deny the possibility of democratic renewal.

Individuals describe themselves as “hopeful and hopeless,” “hopeful in the long run, but right now it feels dark,” or “hopeless that politicians will fix themselves, but hopeful that people will take action.” This duality underscores the instability of political expectations and suggests that nihilism does not eliminate hope entirely, but rather transforms its location, from institutions to individuals, from systems to collective agency.

Furthering this, many respondents demonstrate a clear awareness of ongoing democratic erosion, interpreting recent political developments as evidence of long term decline. Observations that “checks and balances aren’t checking or balancing,” that executive power is being used in “unprecedented ways,” or that “it’s easier to erode democracy than to fix it” reflect a perception that institutional safeguards are weakening. Crucially, these are not framed as temporary deviations, but as indicators of a broader trajectory in which democratic norms are being steadily undermined.

Discussion

Generation Z’s political consciousness cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens because their responses reveal the convergence of several simultaneous crises, the collapse of institutional legitimacy, the erosion of shared truth (Arendt 1968), the transformation of politics into spectacle (Baudrillard 1981), and the devaluation of democratic meaning itself (Levitsky &

Ziblatt 2018). The survey findings demonstrate that Gen Z is not simply politically dissatisfied, but is experiencing democracy as ontologically unstable, emotionally hollow, and epistemically fractured. Respondents repeatedly describe politics as “bullshit and a facade,” “a manipulation contest,” and “like a reality TV show,” while simultaneously expressing fears that democracy itself is collapsing into oligarchy or authoritarianism.

These responses illustrate a condition in which democracy no longer appears as a meaningful system of collective representation, but as an empty performance whose symbols remain intact while its legitimacy deteriorates. What emerges from the findings is not conventional political distrust, but a deeper condition of political nihilism rooted in the convergence of Nietzsche’s collapse of values (1883), Arendt’s destruction of factual truth (1968), Baudrillard’s hyperreality (1981), and Levitsky and Ziblatt’s democratic erosion (2018).

Nietzsche’s concept that “the highest values devalue themselves” (1883) becomes visible throughout the respondents’ language. Democracy continues to exist formally through elections, institutions and political rituals, yet respondents no longer believe these structures possess substantive meaning or transformative capacity. Statements such as “nothing ordinary people do matters,” “voting does little to nothing,” and “whoever has the richest people backing them would win” reveal the perception that democratic participation has become detached from genuine agency. In Nietzschean terms, the democratic ideal survives rhetorically while collapsing experientially. The institutions designed to embody collective representation no longer command belief because they are perceived as incapable of producing truth, accountability, or meaningful change. Political nihilism therefore emerges not from apathy alone, but from the

recognition that inherited political structures no longer fulfill the promises upon which their legitimacy depended upon.

This collapse of meaning and legitimacy cannot be separated from the transformation of politics into spectacle (Baudrillard 1981). Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation becomes central because respondents repeatedly describe politics less as governance and more as performance. When participants characterize politics as "chaotic performances rather than principles" or compare it to "a reality TV show," they are articulating a profoundly hyperreal political condition (Baudrillard 1981). For Baudrillard, late modern society no longer operates through representations of reality, but through simulations that replace reality itself (Baudrillard 1981). Politics ceases to be grounded in material governance and instead becomes driven by image circulation, branding, emotional spectacle, and media performance. Trump's political style exemplifies this transition because his presidency functioned not merely as governance, but as an endless spectacle mediated through rallies, social media, branding, and performative conflict. Governance became inseparable from entertainment. The presidency transformed into what Baudrillard would describe as a simulacrum of power, a symbolic performance masking the absence of substantive democratic reality underneath (Baudrillard 1981).

This hyperreal political environment directly intensifies Nietzschean nihilism because simulation destroys the distinction between authenticity and performance. Respondents repeatedly express feelings that politics is manipulated, artificial, and fundamentally detached from reality.

Baudrillard argues that in hyperreality, the overproduction of information and spectacle causes meaning itself to implode (Baudrillard 1981). Individuals are no longer capable of distinguishing truth from fallacy because both are absorbed into endless media circulation. This logic appears

throughout the survey responses, particularly in fears surrounding propaganda, manipulation, and elite control. Respondents do not merely distrust specific politicians, they distrust the very possibility of authenticity within political life. Politics are experiences of simulation without substance, visibility without reality, and participation without efficacy (Baudrillard 1981). Under these conditions, democratic meaning collapses because the symbolic rituals of democracy persist while belief in their legitimacy disappears.

Arendt's theory in *Truth and Politics* deepens this crisis further because the findings reveal not only institutional distrust, but the erosion of shared factual reality itself. Arendt warned that democratic systems become vulnerable when factual truth loses its authority within public life (Arendt 1968). Politics have always involved persuasion and conflict, but democracy depends upon the existence of a shared world of facts through which citizens can deliberate collectively. Once truth becomes subordinate to emotional manipulation, spectacle, and organized lying, citizens lose the ability to distinguish reality from fabrication. Statements such as "government will just keep manipulating the system to their liking" reflect what Arendt described as the destruction of factual truth through organized political deception.

Importantly, Arendt's framework intersects directly with Baudrillard's hyperreality. In the post-truth era, politics no longer requires coherent lies because the endless circulation of contradictory information itself destabilizes reality. Trump's repeated attacks on "fake news," his contradictory claims, and the broader media environment produce what Arendt feared most, a population overwhelmed not into belief, but into despair and nihilism (Arendt 1968). The danger is not simply that citizens believe falsehoods, but they stop believing truth is attainable altogether. Respondents' feelings of hopelessness, confusion, and exhaustion reflect this collapse

of epistemic stability. Democracy cannot function when citizens no longer believe that objective reality exists independently from media spectacle and political manipulation. Thus, Generation Z's political nihilism emerges not simply from political disagreement, but from the destruction of shared truth and reality itself.

Levitsky and Ziblatt's theory of democratic erosion (2018) provides the structural dimension explaining why these perceptions feel historically urgent to respondents. Their argument that democracies now die gradually from within (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), appears repeatedly throughout the survey findings. Respondents express fears that democratic institutions are "being deconstructed," that the country is becoming "an oligarchy," and that authoritarianism can emerge legally through institutional manipulation. These perceptions directly mirror their argument that modern democratic backsliding occurs through the erosion of mutual toleration, institutional forbearance, and trust in democratic legitimacy (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018).

What makes these frameworks especially powerful together is that they reveal democratic decline as simultaneously institutional, epistemic, and symbolic. Levitsky and Ziblatt explain the structural weakening of democratic norms, Arendt explains the collapse of factual truth necessary for democratic deliberation, Baudrillard explains the replacement of political reality with spectacle and simulation and Nietzsche explains the existential consequence of these conditions through nihilism. Generation Z's survey responses embody the convergence of all four processes at once. Democracy is experienced as procedurally intact yet spiritually hollow, endlessly visible yet substantively absent, saturated with information yet devoid of truth, and formally democratic while increasingly perceived as oligarchic and authoritarian.

What Now? Active Nihilism as Generative Rupture and Democratic Reconstitution

Within this field, two divergent but interrelated tendencies emerge. On one hand, there is a clear movement toward passive nihilism, reflected in expressions of indifference (“it’s not my biggest priority”), resignation (“nothing ordinary people do matters”), and temporal fatalism (“this is the end of democracy,” “it is too late”). These responses indicate a withdrawal from political engagement grounded in the perception that agency is structurally constrained or entirely illusory. Democracy, from this perspective, becomes procedural theater devoid of transformative capacity. This aligns with broader theories of political alienation in late modernity, in which institutional complexity, elite consolidation, and mediated politics generate feelings of powerlessness among citizens increasingly disconnected from decision making processes. Yet this is only half of the picture. Interwoven with these expressions of resignation are persistent, if fragile, articulations of agency that signal the presence of active nihilism. Respondents who claim that “people are starting to wake up,” that “my generation will become more active,” or that “one voice can make a difference” are not affirming the legitimacy of existing institutions, rather, they are repositioning the locus of political meaning. The system may be perceived as hollow, but this very perception becomes the basis for imagining alternative forms of engagement outside its boundaries. This shift is critical. Nietzsche’s conception of active nihilism is pivotal because it frames destruction not merely as collapse, but as a transitional stage preceding the creation of new values (Nietzsche 1883). Generation Z’s responses suggest that many no longer believe democracy, as currently constituted, can actually provide meaningful representation or truth. Yet this rejection does not always produce total disengagement. Instead, respondents who claim that democracy stands “at a

crossroads” or “I feel more empowered to fight for the rights of myself and the people around me,” indicate an emerging consciousness that seeks political meaning outside traditional institutional boundaries. Existing democratic structures are perceived as meaningless, but this perception opens conceptual space for imaging new forms of political participation and collective identity. Active nihilism therefore represents a process of deconstruction in which inherited systems lose authority while alternative forms of agency begin to emerge, even if those alternatives remain unstable, fragmented or undefined.

Active nihilism does not restore faith in traditional democratic structures, it destabilizes their centrality altogether. Political meaning is no longer anchored in elections, parties, or institutional representation, but is instead displaced into decentralized forms of action, including protests, social movements, peer networks, and digital mobilization (Pew Research Center 2024).

The data suggests that many respondents no longer locate democracy primarily within formal institutions, but within decentralized practices of solidarity, visibility, and disruption. References to “unity,” “boycotts,” “marches,” and “advocacy” indicate a reorientation toward participatory and horizontal forms of political engagement in which legitimacy derives less from institutional authority than from presence and performative action. Collective action is imagined less through electoral participation and more through mutual aid, digital mobilization, public demonstration, and networked forms of resistance. Political agency is reconstructed not through faith in the state, but through the creation of alternative publics and counter-hegemonic networks operating across digital and cultural terrains. In effect, Generation Z is renegotiating where politics occurs, how agency is exercised, and what constitutes meaningful participation under conditions of democratic destabilization.

The implications of this are profound for the future of democratic theory and practice. If political nihilism were purely passive, it would signal the erosion of democratic participation and the consolidation of apathy. However, the presence of active nihilism complicates this narrative. It suggests that the breakdown of institutional trust does not eliminate political engagement, but rather transforms its form and orientation. Engagement becomes less formal, less institutional, and more diffuse, operating through networks, movements, and cultural practices rather than traditional democratic channels.

Active nihilism is generative, but it can also be unstable. It is generative because it refuses passive surrender to meaninglessness (Nietzsche 1883) and attempts to reconstruct political agency amid institutional collapse. It allows individuals to imagine forms of participation beyond bureaucratic systems perceived as corrupted or ineffective. Yet, it is dangerous because it lacks stable normative grounding. Unlike traditional democratic participation, which operates through institutional rules and shared civic frameworks, active nihilism functions within conditions of epistemic fragmentation and hyper-mediated spectacle. As a result, the new forms of political meaning it generates are unpredictable. They may produce democratic revitalization through solidarity and activism, or they may deepen polarization and accelerate democratic disintegration.

Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that Generation Z is not disengaging from politics, but redefining what politics means under conditions of institutional decay. Their nihilism reflects a recognition that existing democratic frameworks no longer provide stable meaning, while their expressions of agency indicate a refusal to abandon political life altogether. In this sense, active nihilism functions as both a critique and a creative force, it dismantles inherited structures of

legitimacy while opening space for their reconfiguration. The future of American democracy, therefore, cannot be understood solely in terms of restoring trust in existing institutions. Instead, it must grapple with a more fundamental question, how political meaning can be reconstructed in a context where its traditional foundations have been eroded. Generation Z's responses suggest that this reconstruction will not occur through a simple return to past norms, but through an ongoing process of experimentation, contestation, and redefinition. In this light, nihilism is not the end of democratic life, but it is a threshold condition, the point at which the collapse of inherited meaning forces the creation of new forms of political existence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has demonstrated that political nihilism is apparent among Generation Z, but it is not reducible to laziness, apathy, or fleeting dissatisfaction. It must be understood as a historically conditioned consciousness produced by the contradictions of the post-truth era. Political nihilism emerges when democratic institutions lose not merely trust, but their capacity to produce coherent social reality. Generation Z entered political life amid financial crisis, pandemic disruption, escalating inequality, democratic norm erosion, algorithmic media saturation, and the spectacle centered politics of the Trump Era. Respondents are not merely questioning politicians or policy outcomes, they are questioning whether the existing democratic order retains any capacity to mediate truth, representation, or collective agency in a meaningful way. They inherited a civic language that still praised democracy while simultaneously witnessing institutions fail to embody its promises.

The findings of this study contribute to and extend the theoretical frameworks of Nietzsche, Arendt, Baudrillard, and Levitsky and Ziblatt by demonstrating how these abstract theories converge empirically within the political consciousness of Generation Z. While Nietzsche conceptualized nihilism as the devaluation of dominant values (Nietzsche 1883), this research operationalizes political nihilism sociologically by showing how democratic institutions themselves become experiences as hollow, performative, and incapable of producing meaning among young Americans.

The survey findings reveal that Gen Z's distrust is not limited to politicians or parties, but extends toward democracy as an epistemic and symbolic system, thereby illustrating how nihilism manifests politically through perceptions of powerlessness, elite capture, and institutional decay. Simultaneously this study empirically demonstrates how the erosion of factual truth produces not merely misinformation, but existential exhaustion and democratic alienation among citizens socialized within hyper-mediated political environments.

This further develops the theory of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1981), by showing how respondents themselves interpret contemporary politics as spectacle, simulation, and performance, repeatedly describing governance as "reality TV," manipulation and theatrical performance rather than substantive democratic action. In addition, it connects institutional backsliding to subjective political consciousness, demonstrating how democratic decline is psychologically and culturally internalized by younger generations as hopelessness, cynicism and distrust.

Most importantly, this synthesization creates a unified explanation of contemporary political nihilism, arguing that democratic destabilization today is simultaneously institutional, epistemological, symbolic and existential. Rather than treating democratic erosion, post-truth

politics, and hyperreality as separate phenomena, the findings demonstrate that they mutually reinforce one another to produce a generation that experiences politics as omnipresent yet meaningless, hyper-visible yet detached from reality, and formally democratic yet devoid of legitimacy.

Yet the deeper contribution of this thesis is to show that nihilism is internally divided. Passive nihilism manifests as withdrawal, resignation, ironic detachment, and the belief that nothing can change. But active nihilism appears when disillusionment becomes critical, when the loss of faith in inherited structures opens the search for new forms of collective life. This was visible in respondents who placed hope not in institutions, but in movements, communities, protests, solidarity networks, and generational transformation. They may distrust the formal architecture of democracy while still desiring democratic power in substance. This paradox suggests that what is dying may not be democratic aspiration itself, but confidence in its current institutional form.

The broader implication is profound, Generation Z is not the cause of democratic crisis, but its most lucid symptom. Their alienation reflects a polity that has overproduced spectacle and underproduced legitimacy, that has preserved procedures while hollowing out belief, which has demanded participation while failing to generate trust. Young people are often accused of disengagement, yet the findings suggest a harsher truth, many institutions have disengaged from them first.

And so the final question is not whether Generation Z believes in democracy, but whether democracy can still make itself believable. If politics remains a theatre of managed outrage, concentrated wealth, epistemic chaos, and symbolic participation, political nihilism will deepen

as the dominant civic mood of the twenty-first century. But if collapse can be recognized honestly, then it can also become the precondition for reconstruction. Nihilism is dangerous precisely because it clears the ground beneath inherited structures of meaning, legitimacy, and authority. Yet within that destruction lies the possibility of reconstitution. Whether that cleared ground produces authoritarianism, fragmentation, or democratic renewal remains unsolved. What Generation Z ultimately reveals is that legitimacy can no longer survive through ritual, nostalgia, spectacle, or institutional permanence alone; it must be continually substantiated through material accountability, political transparency, and the restoration of meaningful collective agency. If American democracy fails to meet that demand, Generation Z may not be remembered as the generation that abandoned democracy, but as the generation that first recognized the depth of its crisis and forced the question of whether democratic legitimacy could still be reconstructed at all.

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