



SOJOURN
STRATEGIES



ARIEL
RESEARCH
PARTNERS

2026 UNDERSTANDING THE **DISAFFECTED** ELECTORATE

Katrina Gamble, PhD, Sojourn Strategies
Martina Smith, Ariel Research Partners
Richard Shafranek

Project Background

Building on more than **FIVE**
years of Democracy & Power
Innovation Fund research and
learning

- Black Values research revealed the **Rightfully Cynical**, a large segment of the Black electorate, is frustrated with politics, with 84% believing the “system was just not built for people like me.”
- AAPI values research found a significant lack of trust in representation among the AAPI community in North Carolina, **with 46% of respondents believing that politicians fail to represent their communities’ interests.**
- Regardless of race, we’ve **seen a declining trust in government** in the United States and growing frustration with politics and elections.
- Organizers see these as key **individuals to be organized** into civic homes.

Core research questions

1. Who are the disaffected?
2. What is the relationship between disaffection and agency and civic participation?
3. What are the pathways to disrupt disengagement despite feelings of disaffection?

Methodology



National survey

Sojourn Strategies and the research team conducted the national survey from September-October 2025. NORC at the University of Chicago fielded the survey. The total sample size for this survey is **N = 4,506**. The margin of error for the full sample is **±2.66%**.

Total Sample

4,506

Black
1,147

Hispanic
1,154

White
1,691

API
1,092

AIAN/Other
264

Focus groups

Four focus groups were conducted from January-February 2026 to further understand **sentiments around belonging, trust, and civic engagement**.

	Parameters	# of Participants
Focus Group 1	Multiracial and mixed gender: high disaffection, low trust, and low belonging	Nine
Focus Group 2	Black, Latino, and API Youth (18-29): very high disaffection	Eight
Focus Group 3	Black, Latino, and API: very low belonging	Six
Focus Group 4	Black and Latino: very low trust	Eight

Composite Variables

We developed **three nonoverlapping composite variables** to capture the dynamic dimensions of the surveys core frameworks – trust, disillusionment, and belonging.

Trust Composite

- Trust in federal, state, and local government
- Confidence in major institutions
- Trust in elected officials
- Trust in people with different political views
- Generalized social trust

Disillusionment Composite

- Vote power and collective power
- Perceived political influence
- Outlook for the future
- Strongest feeling about politics and government

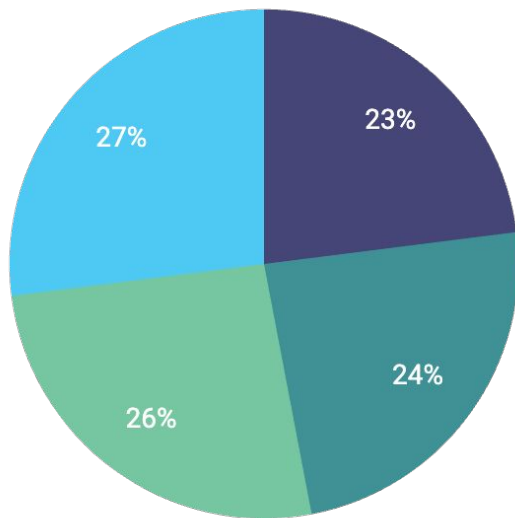
Belonging Composite

- Connection to others
- Community understands culture
- Organizational membership
- Close friends
- Shared Fate

Disillusionment

Black respondents are less likely to be disillusioned than the general population, whereas White respondents are more likely to have high levels of disillusionment.

Overall population

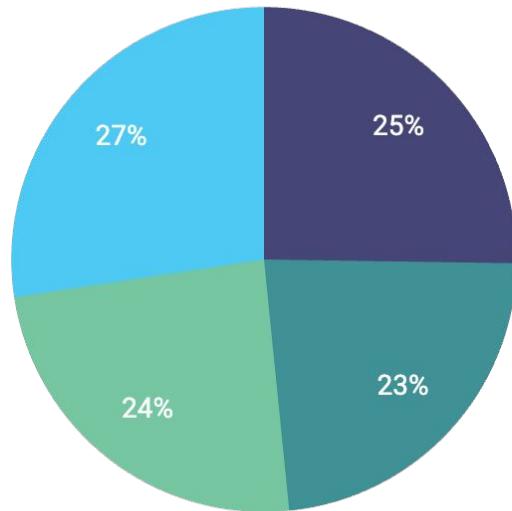


- Very little disillusionment
- Some disillusionment
- A lot of disillusionment
- A great deal of disillusionment

	Black	Hispanic	API	White	AIAN/Other
Very little disillusionment	27%	23%	27%	22%	28%
Some disillusionment	30%	28%	23%	21%	23%
A lot of disillusionment	28%	23%	22%	27%	27%
A great deal of disillusionment	16%	27%	28%	29%	22%

Black respondents have much lower levels of trust, whereas White and API respondents have significantly higher levels of trust.

Overall population



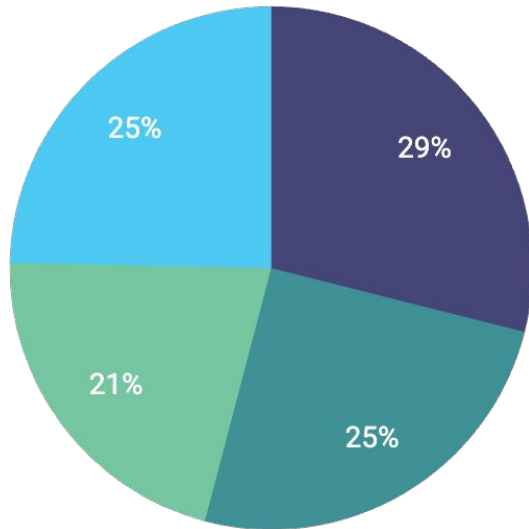
● Very little trust
 ● Some trust
 ● A lot of trust
 ● A great deal of trust

	Black	Hispanic	API	White	AIAN/Other
Very little trust	35%	29%	18%	23%	24%
Some trust	25%	28%	21%	22%	28%
A lot of trust	22%	24%	29%	24%	27%
A great deal of trust	18%	20%	32%	31%	22%

Belonging

Black and White respondents are significantly higher on the belonging scale, while Hispanic respondents are significantly lower on the belonging dimension.

Overall population



● Very little belonging
 ● Some belonging
 ● A lot of belonging
 ● A great deal of belonging

	Black	Hispanic	API	White	AIAN/Other
Very little belonging	25%	34%	29%	28%	31%
Some belonging	25%	31%	28%	23%	24%
A lot of belonging	21%	21%	24%	21%	24%
A great deal of belonging	29%	14%	19%	28%	21%

Key Findings

1. The disaffected tend to be **younger**, have **fewer resources**, and are more likely to experience **systemic and institutional failures**.
2. **Belonging** is the strongest predictor of participation among the disaffected electorate.
3. **Frustration** is the most prominent sentiment about elections and politics and **affects efficacy and perceptions of power**.
4. The **disaffected electorate is NOT unreachable**. They are **more likely to act** when they feel like **they belong** and can see the **tangible impact of their actions**.

Who are the disaffected?

How did we define the disaffected?

The disaffected are those who have the compounded effect of high disillusionment and low trust.

**High
Disillusionment**



**Low
Trust**



**Disaffected
Electorate**

Feeling unheard

Diminished hope
for the future

Broken promises

Social distrust

Declining trust in
politicians

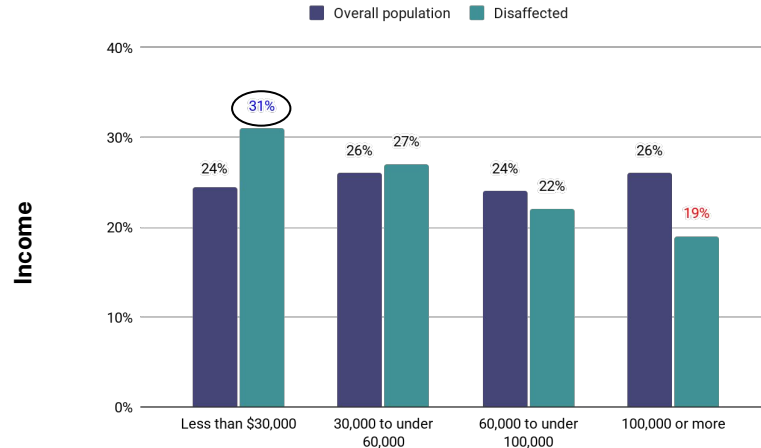
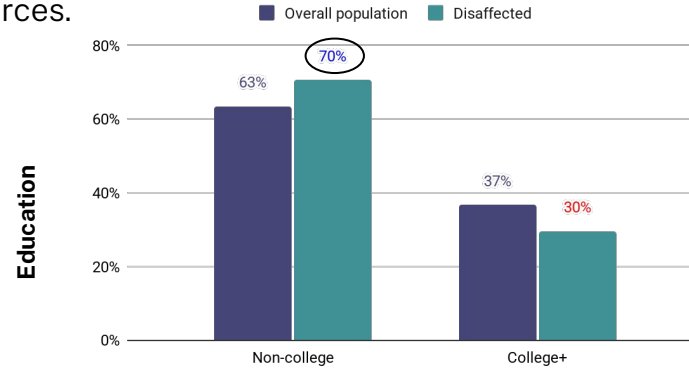
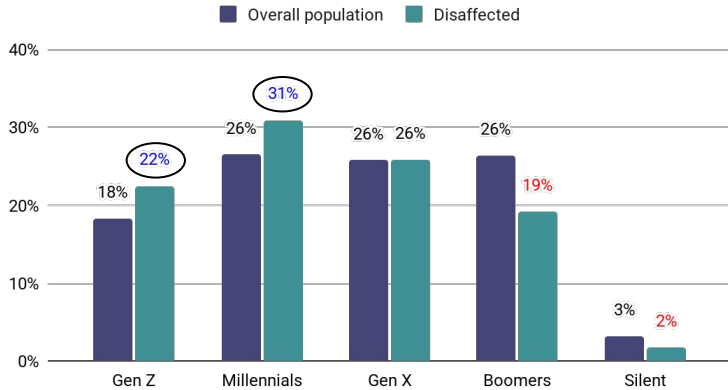
Reduced faith in
institutions



Who are the disaffected?

The disaffected tend to be younger and have fewer resources.

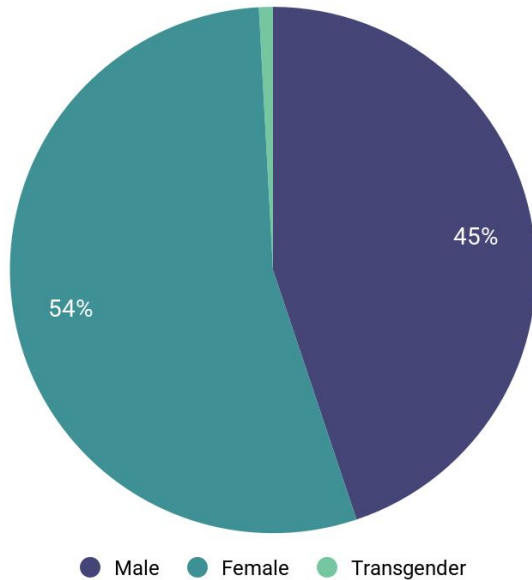
Generation



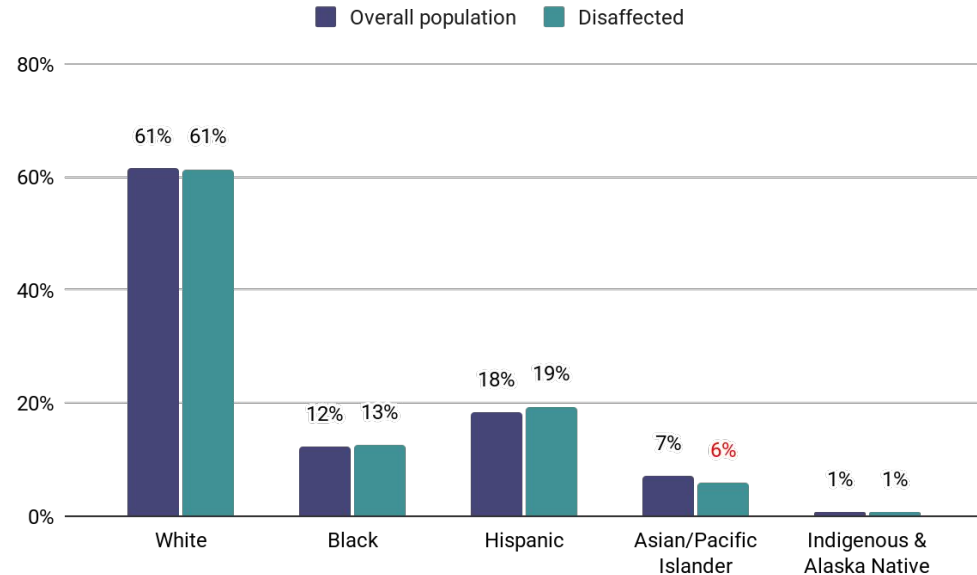
Who are the disaffected?

There are no major racial or gender differences between the general population and the disaffected, except API respondents are slightly less likely to be disaffected, and transgender people are slightly more likely to be disaffected.

Gender (Disaffected)



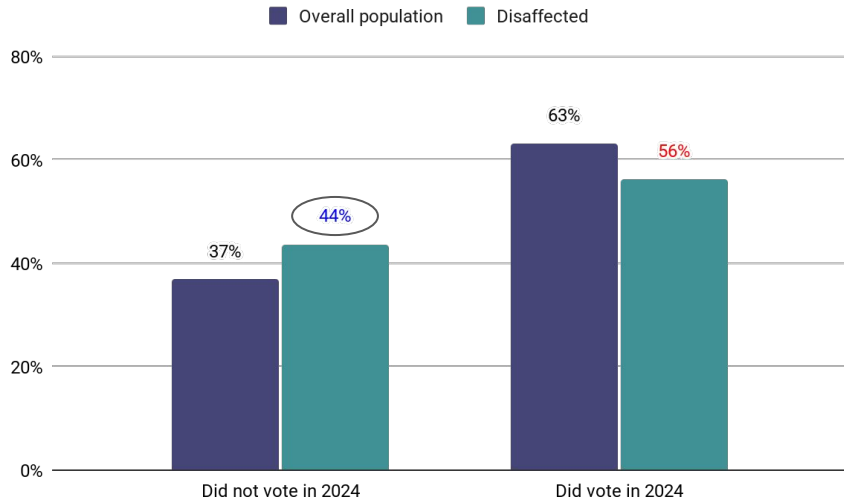
Race & Ethnicity



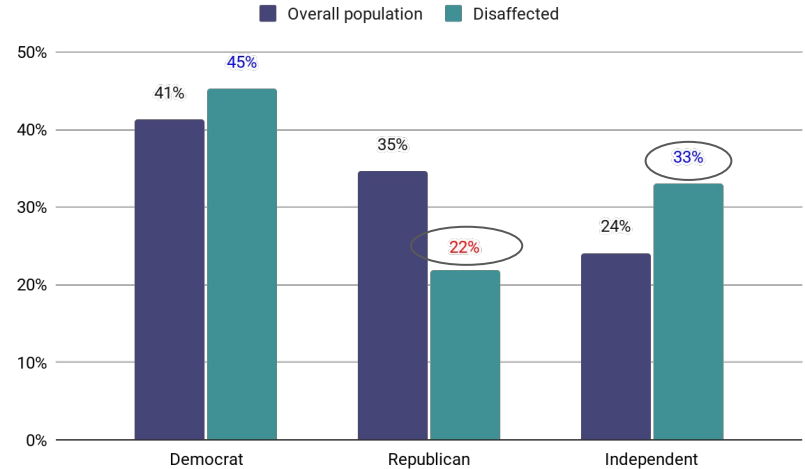
Who are the disaffected?

The disaffected are less likely to have voted in 2024, and they are more likely to identify as Independents and much less likely to identify as Republicans.

2024 Vote



Party Identification



Who are the disaffected?



Most people are concerned about the cost of living, and for the disaffected, other issues such as crime, immigration, and voting rights are less of a priority.

<i>Which of the following would you say is the most important for you?</i>	Overall Population	Disaffected
Jobs	6%	5%
Abortion access	3%	3%
Crime and violence	11%	8%
The cost of living	47%	54%
Racism and discrimination	7%	8%
Immigration	8%	3%
Police brutality	1%	1%
Voting rights	5%	4%
None of these	4%	4%

Who are the disaffected?



When you drill down on affordability, everyday costs, housing, and wages are most pressing.

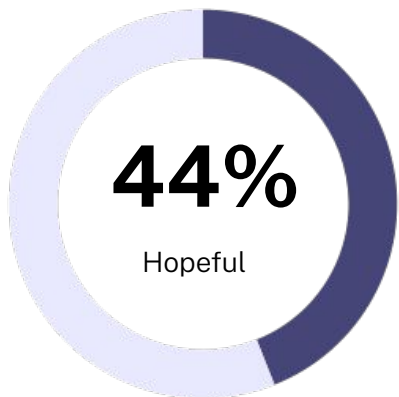
<i>Which of these costs worries you the most right now? Select up to three.</i>	Overall Population	Disaffected
Everyday costs (like food, light, and gas bills) are too high.	73%	80%
Rent or house payments are too high.	44%	53%
Doctor visits and medicine cost too much.	33%	34%
Jobs don't pay enough or offer good benefits.	32%	43%
Child care/elder care costs too much.	10%	9%
Other	3%	3%
None of these	10%	6%

Hope is waning for most people

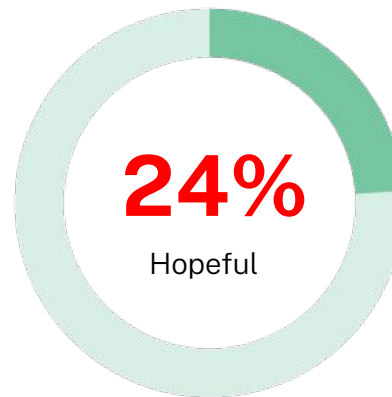
While the majority of people are worried about the future, this is an especially high sentiment among the disaffected.

How hopeful or worried are you about the future?

Total population



Disaffected

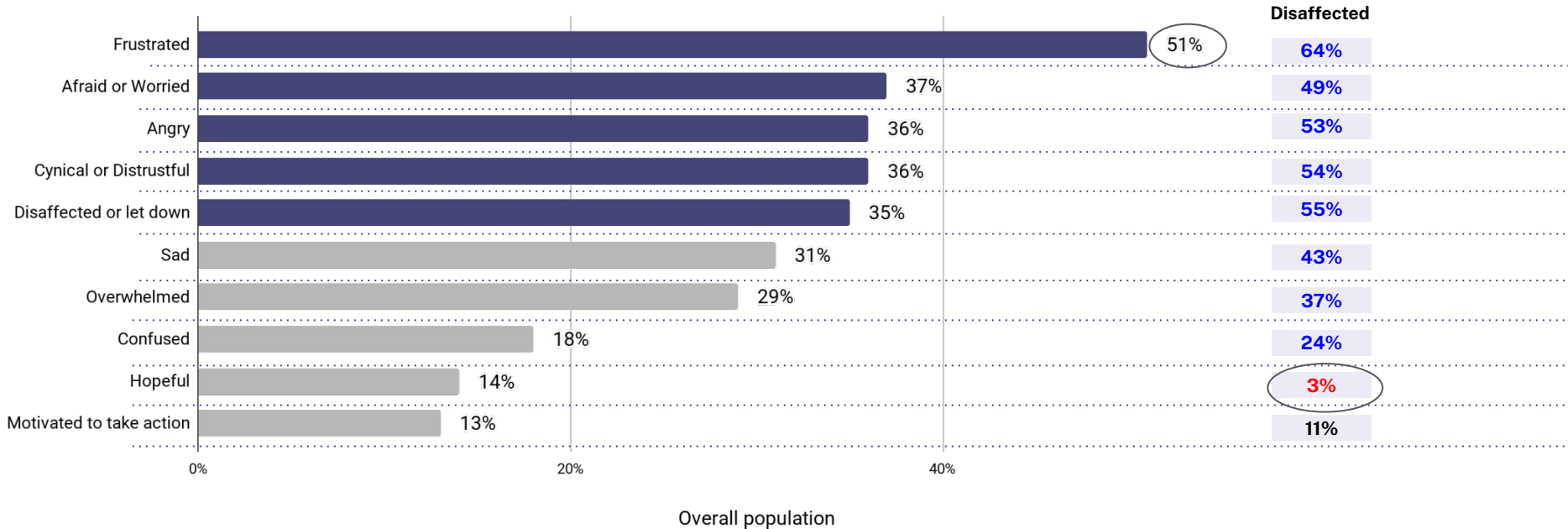


Frustration is driving sentiment about politics




Emotions about politics and government are **broadly negative**, with frustration at the center.

When you think about politics and government, how do they make you feel?




Growing mistrust, broken promises, and feelings of being ignored drive frustration

Participants feel let down when the government breaks promises and ignores ordinary people.

 It's the **inability to trust a lot of what politicians** say for me, at least. They can say one thing and do something else completely different or ignore what they were originally saying.

- Man, High disillusionment & low belonging

 [I] Feel like the **lack of support for the working class** tying into what someone said previously. There's many people who have been college educated, and some are not. There are those who actually work hard for a living ... **I feel like when you get a step further, it's like the price is constantly going up, and it's like no help being made.** It's like people are still living check to check. So, I feel like that's where the disappointment lies with me.

- Woman, Very low trust

Politicians must first understand individuals' lived experience to build trust.

Participants say people in power often misunderstand the everyday realities of the people they govern. They point to a lack of lived experience, empathy, economic understanding, and nuance. Across groups, the clearest message is that leaders cannot build trust if they remain socially and materially distant from the people whom their decisions affect the most.



I would just say experience. I think it's one thing to read or hear about something, but it's another thing to actually have to live it. **I think they're just so far separated that they can't even fathom how it affects individuals such as us.**

- Woman, High disillusionment & low belonging



I think so many of them don't understand what it's like to live within a certain income bracket. Many of them are much, much wealthier. I think if they understood, like, that they could live on the same income we live, the same situations, cities that we live in, the same types of places we live in, I think they would, be more willing to change into something for the people.

- Woman, Very low trust

Disaffection is based on tangible, lived experiences

Participants can name specific events that intensified their disappointment, but most describe disaffection as a pattern rather than a one-off event.



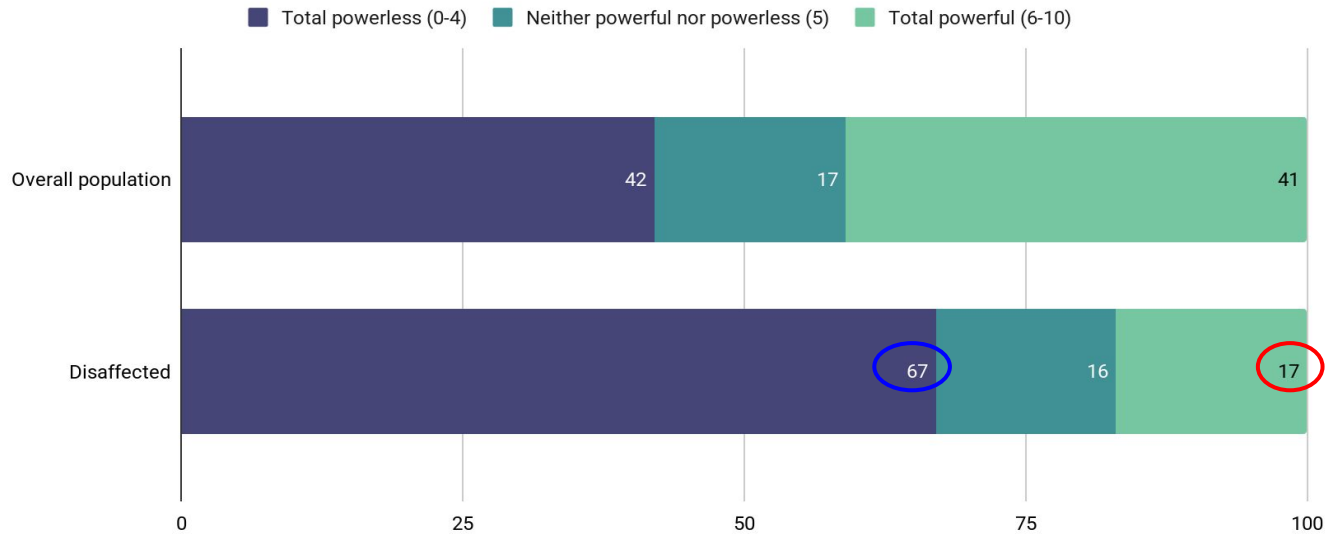
I had, two events in my life. One, my stepdad was deported in a way like what they're doing now. **They're going out and looking for people who are not born in the United States instead of going after people who have committed crimes.** So, that greatly affected my family with him being deported. He had been here for 11 years working. The second one is my great grandmother who had been on SSI [Supplemental Security Income]. Her funding got lowered. They're taking funding from hospitals, Medicaid, Medicare, SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program].

- Young woman, High disillusionment

Disaffection, agency, and civic participation

Perceptions of voter power are much lower among the disaffected.

No matter how often you vote in elections, how much power do you feel your vote has to change things that matter most to you? Rate on a scale of 0 to 10.



Overall Population
 5.9 (mean)

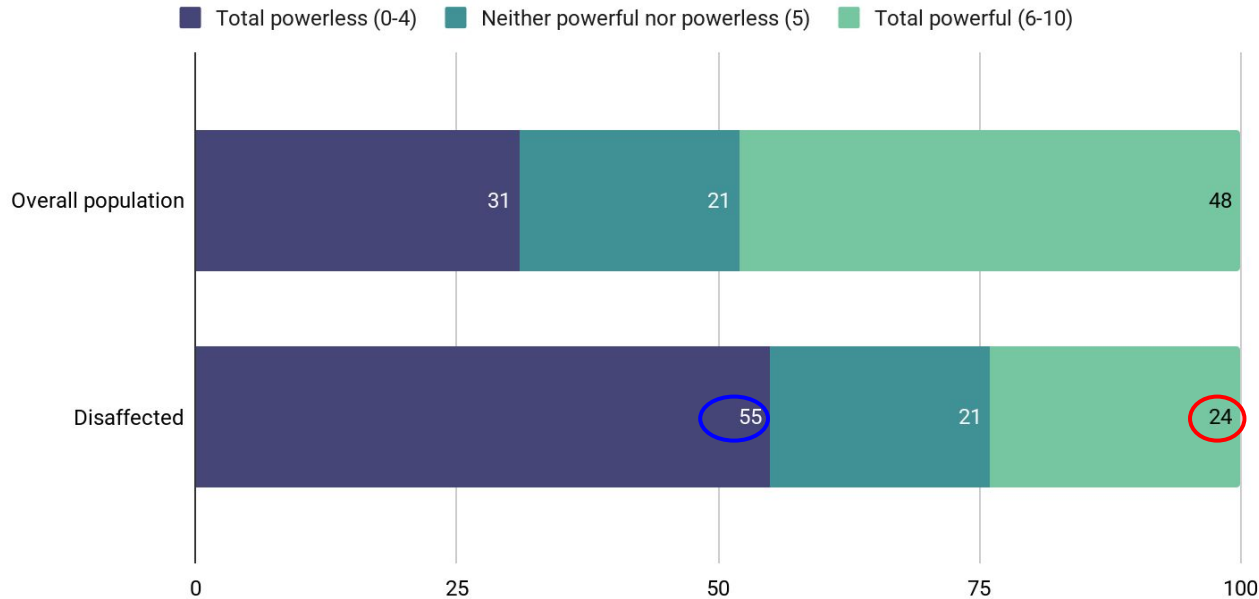
Disaffected
 3.9 (mean)

Note: Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.
Note: Nonsubstantive responses ("Other," "Don't know," "Skipped," and "Refused" were removed from this chart for clarity)

Agency

While collective power is higher than vote power among the disaffected, it is still significantly lower than the population overall.

No matter how often you vote in elections, how much power do you feel your community has to change things that matter most to your community? Rate on a scale of 0 to 10.



Overall Population

6.4 (mean)



Disaffected

4.6 (mean)

Disaffection most often results in withdrawal

Some feel there is nothing they can do and pull back from formal politics and instead focus on their family and community. Others stay engaged, protest, support local efforts, or keep going precisely because doing nothing feels worse.



[It] kind of, like, makes you question **does your vote really matter?**

- Woman, High disillusionment & low belonging

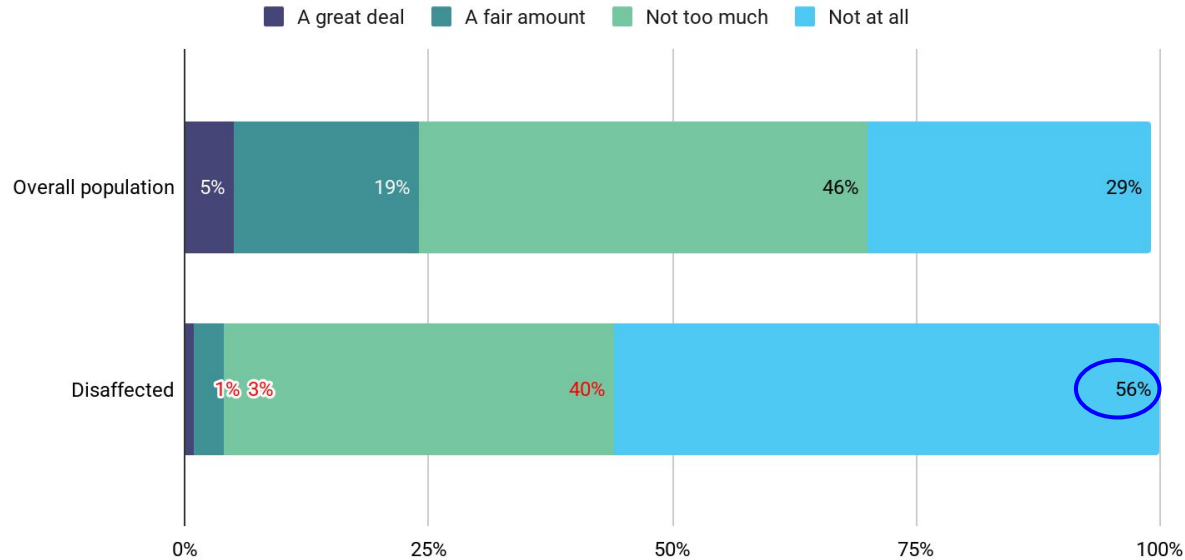


One time I voted. I was so disappointed. I was so disappointed with it all. So, I did not vote one year, and I have nothing to say. Nothing good to say. Nothing bad to say. **I just went to work and took care of my family.**

- Woman, Very low belonging

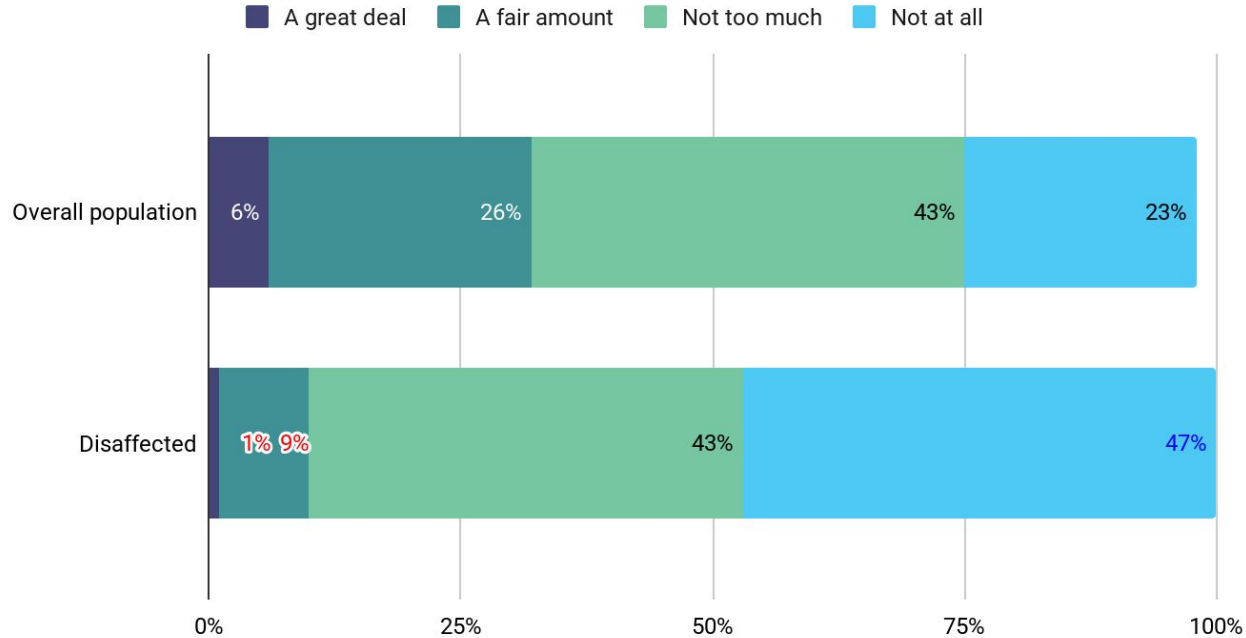
The federal government feels inaccessible for most adults, especially for the disaffected.

How much say do people like you have in what the federal government does?



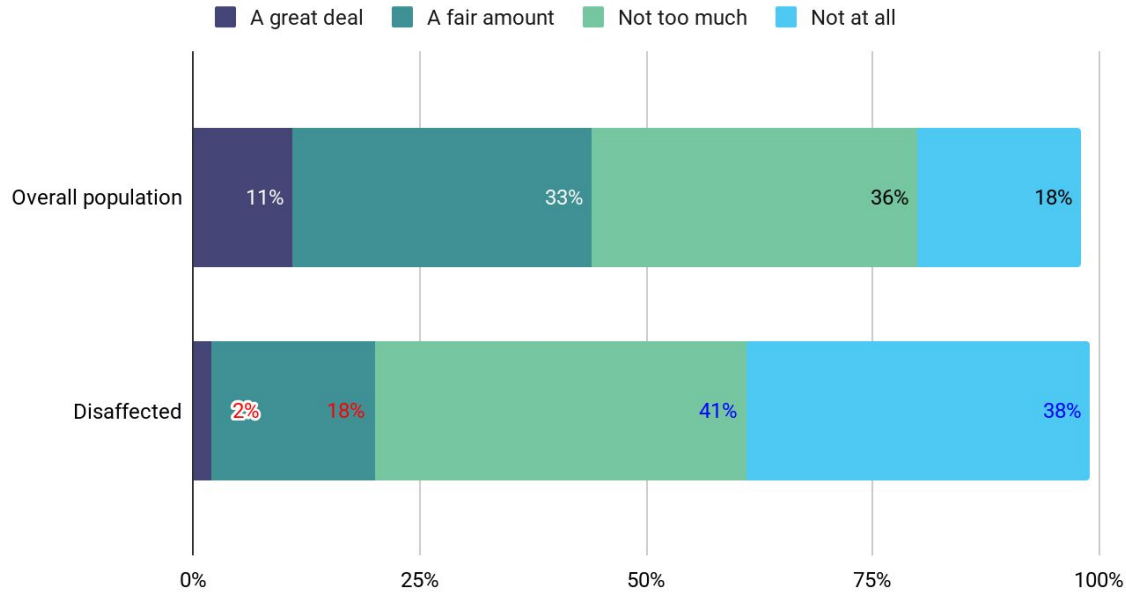
Perceived influence over state government remains limited.

How much say do people like you have in what the state government does?



Perceived influence is strongest at the local level, but gaps remain.

How much say do people like you have in what the local government does?



Politics evokes avoidance and frustration



SOJOURN
STRATEGIES



ARIEL
RESEARCH
PARTNERS

When asked to personify politics, participants described someone they would avoid, argue with, block, or keep at a distance. Those responses capture the emotional tone of trust better than any scale. Ultimately, they experience politics as exhausting.



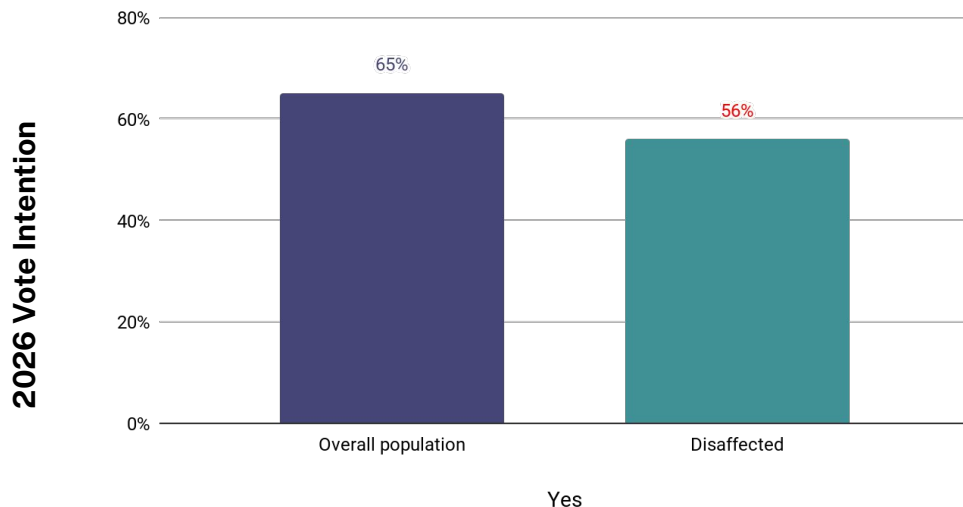
Please listen to the audio recording [here](#).

Civic Participation



While disaffection does appear to suppress voting, there is no significant difference of overall participation.

If the November 3, 2026, midterm elections for the U.S. House of Representatives and some U.S. Senate seats were held today, would you vote?



	Mean Political Action	Mean Civic Action
Overall Population	2.70	1.81
Disaffected	2.73	1.72

Note: Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.

Note: Nonsubstantive responses ("Other," "Don't know," "Skipped," and "Refused" were removed from this chart for clarity)

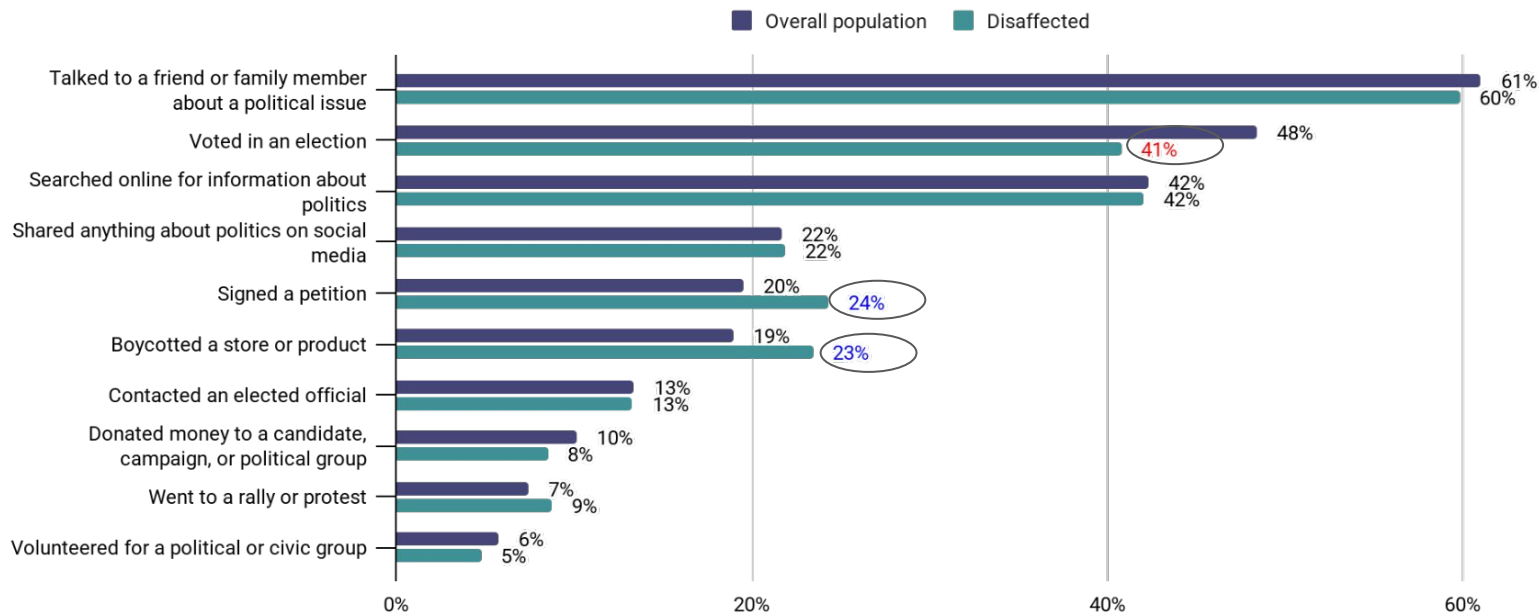
Civic Participation



The disaffected are not less civically engaged than the general population with the exception of voting. In two instances, the disaffected are actually more engaged.

In the past 12 months, which of these have you done?

Traditional Political Actions



Note: Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.

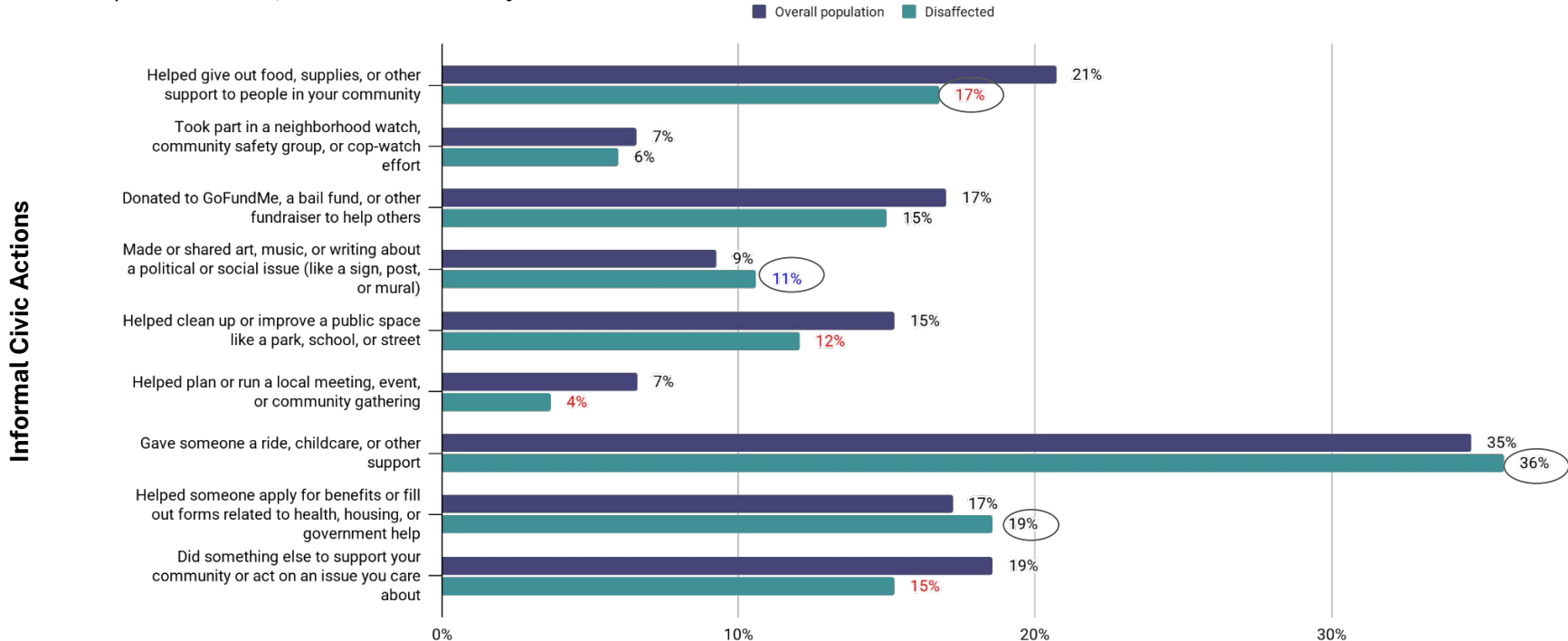
Note: Nonsubstantive responses (“Other,” “Don’t know,” “Skipped,” and “Refused” were removed from this chart for clarity)

Civic Participation



The disaffected are more likely to engage in actions that directly support individuals within their community.

In the past 12 months, which of these have you done?

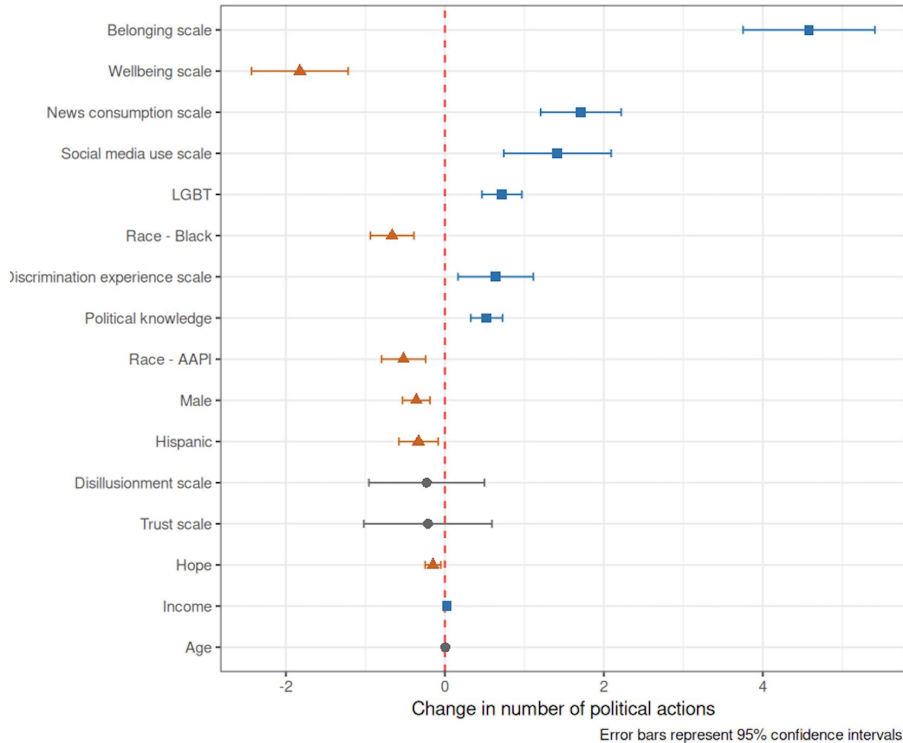


Note: Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.

Note: Nonsubstantive responses (“Other,” “Don’t know,” “Skipped,” and “Refused” were removed from this chart for clarity)

Pathways to Engagement

Predicting Political Action among the Disaffected

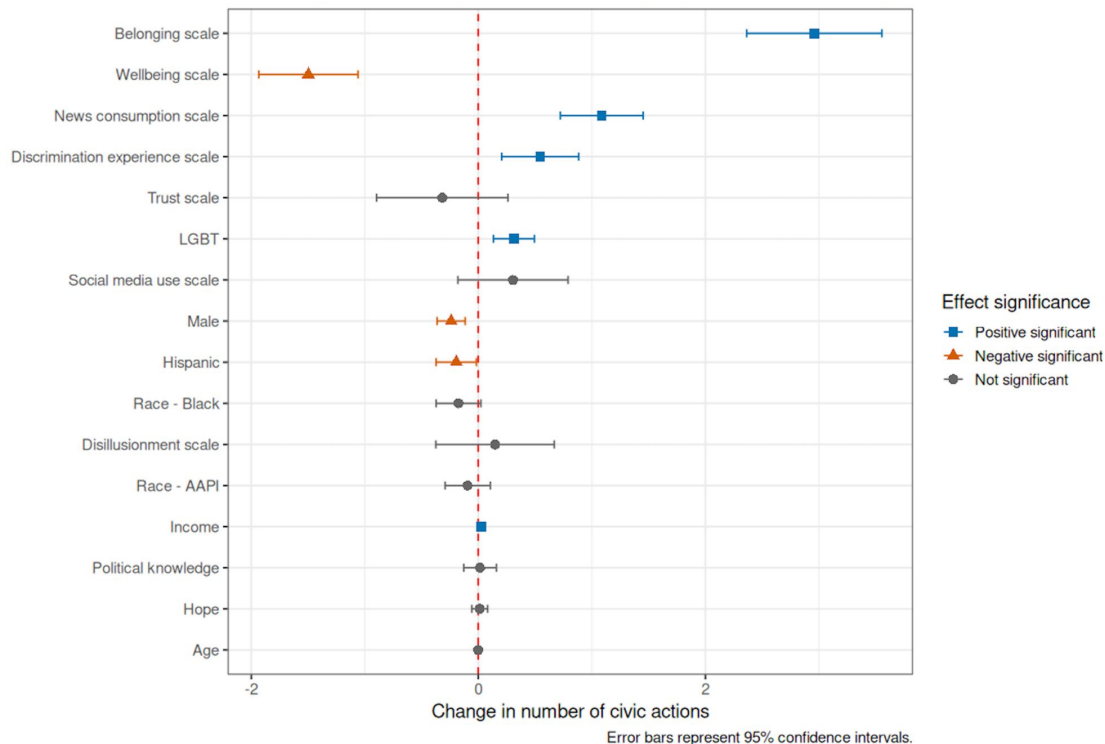


Effect significance

- Positive significant
- ▲ Negative significant
- Not significant

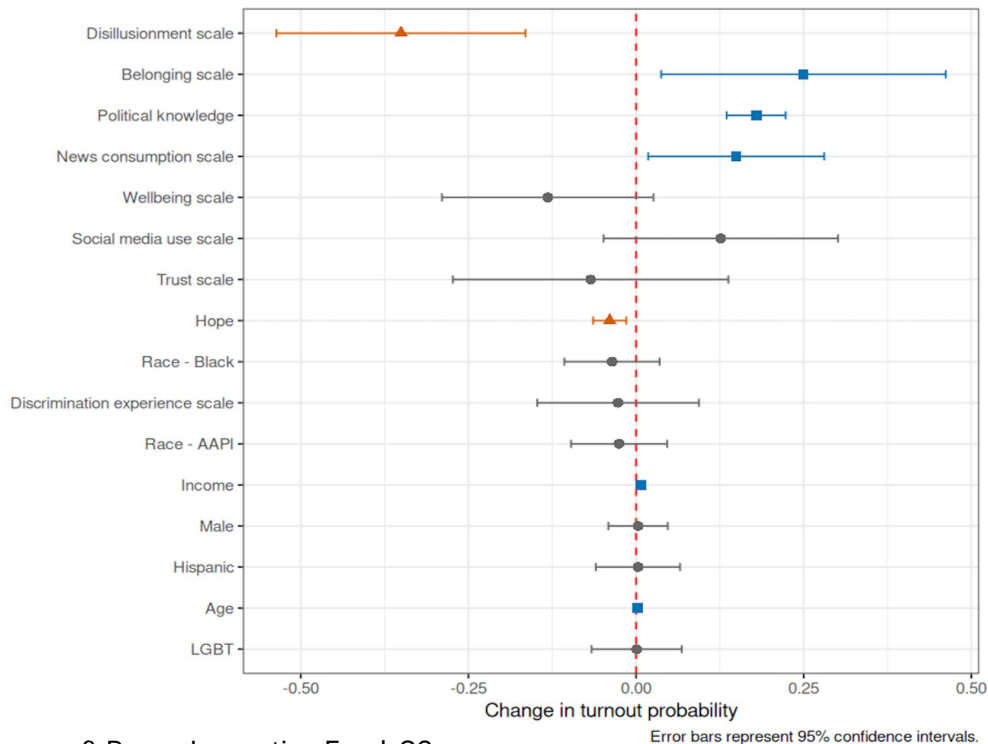
Belonging
Moving from the lowest level of belonging to the highest is associated with **nearly five** additional political actions.

Predicting Civic Action, among the Disaffected



Belonging
Moving from the lowest level of belonging to the highest is associated with **three** additional civic actions.

Predicting 2026 Turnout, among the Disaffected



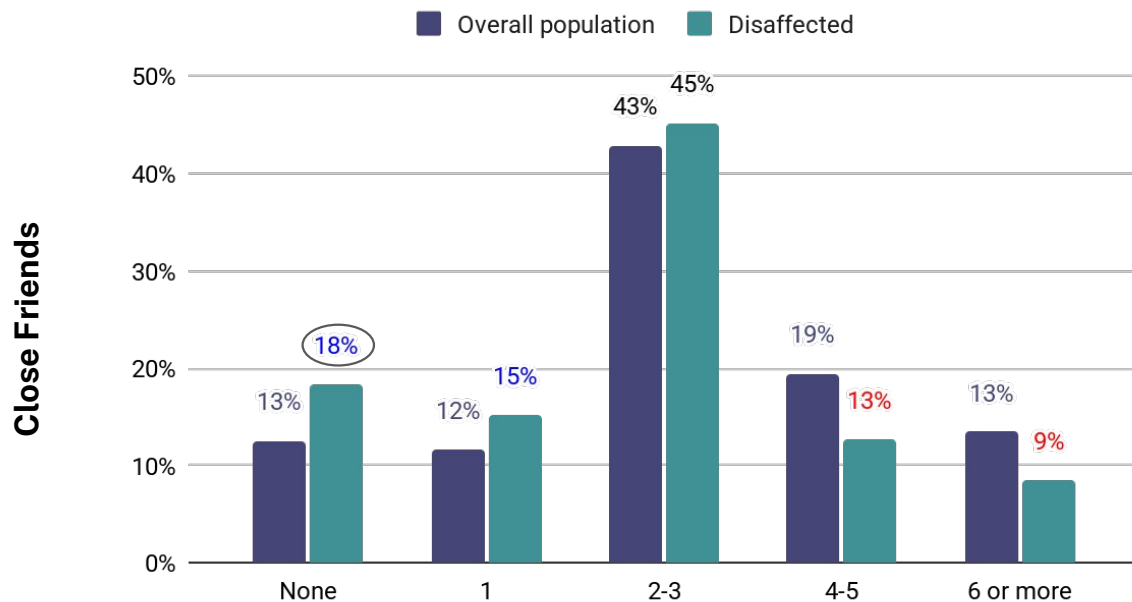
Effect significance

- Positive significant
- ▲ Negative significant
- Not significant

Belonging
Moving from the lowest level of belonging to the highest is associated with **25% increase in 2026** vote likelihood. Even just a one increment increase in belonging increases vote likelihood by 2.5%.

Belonging

A significant segment of the disaffected is extremely isolated with no or few friends or organizational affiliations.



Belonging

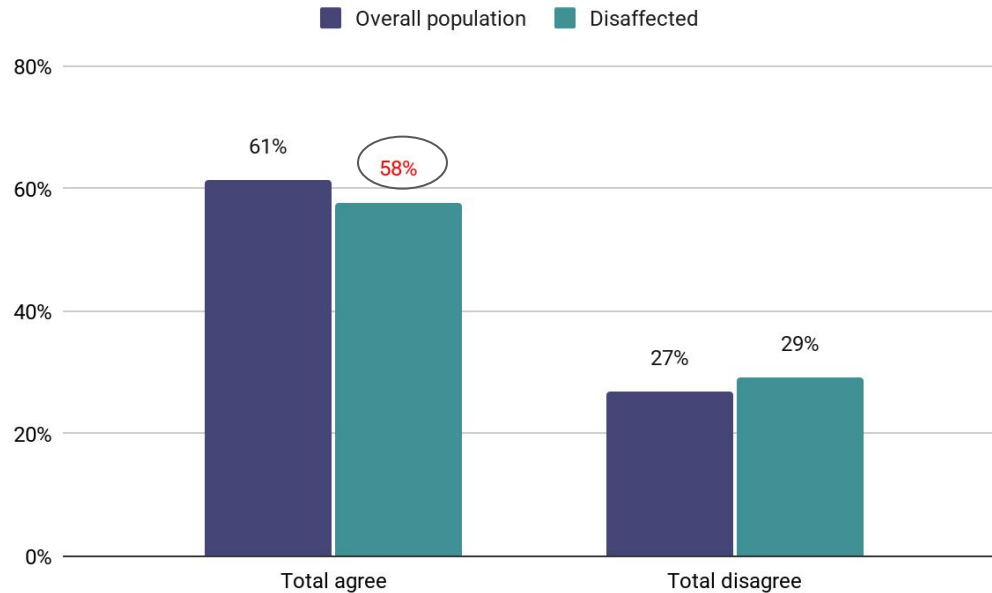
The disaffected are not connected to many community spaces, except online.

<i>Are you a member of any of these groups? Select all that apply.</i>	Overall Population	Disaffected
None of these	40%	49%
An online community or social media group (like message boards or a Facebook or WhatsApp group)	33%	33%
A church, mosque, synagogue, or other religious group	28%	20%
An advocacy group (for example, AARP, MADD)	14%	9%
A local community group (like a block club or neighborhood watch)	11%	7%
A professional association (for example, ABA, AMA)	8%	5%
A labor union (for example, SEIU, AFL-CIO)	6%	4%
A political group (like Working Families Party; Turning Point, USA; or No Labels)	4%	3%
A fraternity or sorority (for example, Alpha Kappa Alpha, Phi Delta Theta, Sigma Lambda Beta, etc.)	4%	2%

Belonging

While the disaffected have low levels of belonging, the majority still have a desire to be more connected to community.

How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: I would like to feel more connected to people in my community.



Belonging

Most people find belonging through their personal relationships and places they consider home.

Think of a place where you really felt like you belonged. What place comes to mind?

Disaffected



Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, 40

Note: Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.

Note: Nonsubstantive responses ('Other', 'Don't +now', 'Skipped', and 'Refused') were removed from this chart for clarity

Belonging

Belonging depends on feeling safe, accepted, and “at home.” Participants feel they belong in places that are familiar, affirming, and safe or where they share interests, identity, or support. When that fit is missing, they pull back rather than lean in.



I do already feel like I belong ... I would say it's just a place where you feel comfortable. Like, when you think of the word 'home,' that's like, one of the places you think of first. **And you ... should feel accepted for who you are, even if, you know, the people around you don't necessarily have the exact same perspectives as you.** Like, they can still accept you for your gender, your race, like, every part of your identity, and you should feel okay with that. [That] should make you feel like you belong.

- Young Man, Very high disillusionment



I would say home, like, my hometown. When I go to my hometown, which is an hour and a half away from here, I'm at home. **I feel like that's where I belong. It's safety.** My mama, my dad, my aunties, uncles, everybody [is] there. I can go in the room and be alone, but I'm not alone. Like, my mama [is] there. I just feel safe.

- Woman, Very little belonging

Belonging

The disaffected tend to have lower levels of belonging. However, they feel most connected to people like themselves and the working class.

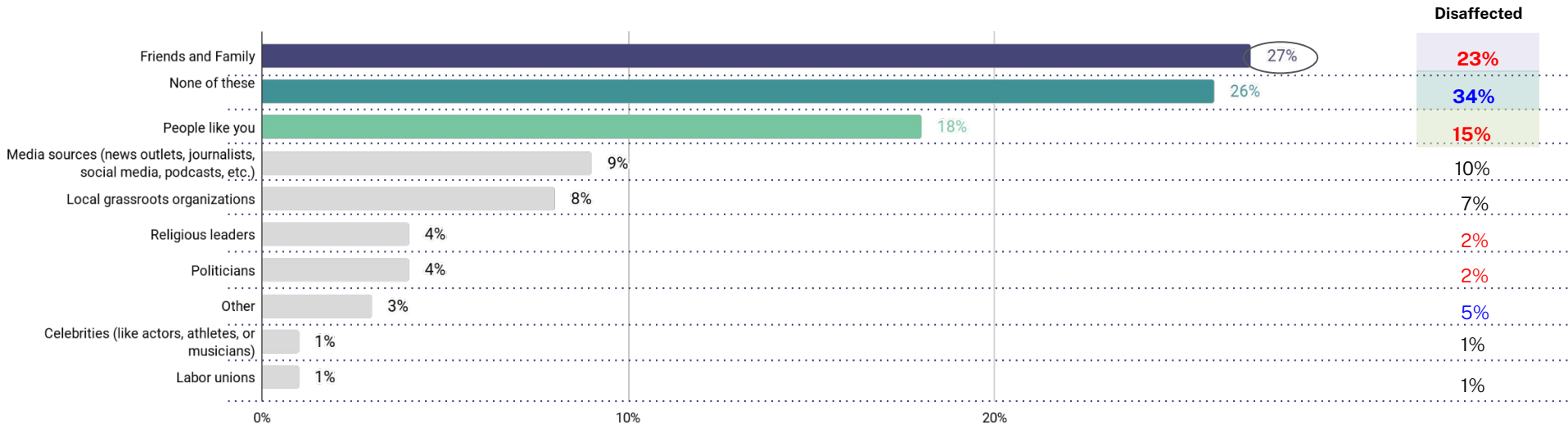
<i>Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “not at all connected” and 5 means “extremely connected,” how connected do you feel to each of these?</i>	Overall Population	Disaffected
People like you	68%	57%
People in your neighborhood	48%	34%
Americans	58%	39%
Working class	61%	52%
People who share your faith	51%	38%

Personal networks



More than one-fourth of the population doesn't trust anyone to provide information about politics. While trust is fragile, **personal networks provide the most viable option to reach people.**

Who do you trust most to give you news and information about politics? Select only one.



Note: Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.
Note: Nonsubstantive responses ("Other," "Don't know," "Skipped," and "Refused" were removed from this chart for clarity)

People join civic spaces when there are clear benefits and social connection

People do not reject joining groups or organizations outright. They reject groups that feel costly, rigid, intimidating, or irrelevant. **Joining becomes possible when the group matches their interests** and comes through someone they already trust. For lower-belonging participants, the entry point matters as much as the purpose.



I would be more geared toward the actual benefits that I'd be able to take advantage of. If you're part of an organization, I would think I'd be going there for certain things. **I figure if there are some sort of things that it provides me, some connections, some friends [and] that I could still be me.**

- Man, Very little belonging

Safety Comfortable
Relevance Trusted
Fit Flexible
Belonging
Support
Acceptance Family

Recommendations



- 1.** Center **community**. While the disaffected are more isolated, **58%** still indicate a desire to be connected to community, and community provides **hope**.
- 2.** The best way to engage the disaffected is through their existing **social networks**, especially **friends and family**. It is also important to **cultivate online spaces**, because that is where many disaffected are connecting.
- 3.** Identify messengers that have **shared working-class experiences**, and lean into working-class values that address the immediate struggles that the disaffected are facing.
- 4.** Build **civic homes** that create belonging by establishing spaces that are **safe**, where people feel **heard**, and where they can experience **tangible benefits**.

Recommendations



- 5.** Do not assume that disaffection means low civic participation; instead, **work to identify aligned forms of action** for those you're working to organize.
- 6.** When engaging the disaffected, **do not start with voting.** Instead, invite them into spaces with **clear and tangible pathways** to address their most pressing concerns, which is primarily financial strain, but also strategies that are rightsizing power for the working class.
- 7.** **Art and cultural organizing** are also a good starting pathway for individuals who are disaffected



SOJOURN
STRATEGIES



ARIEL
RESEARCH
PARTNERS

THANK YOU!

www.dpifund.org
www.sojournstrategies.com