



SOJOURN  
STRATEGIES



ARIEL  
RESEARCH  
PARTNERS

# 2026 UNDERSTANDING THE DISAFFECTED ELECTORATE

---

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

## Key Takeaways

1. The disaffected electorate are **younger, have fewer resources**, and are more likely to experience **institutional failures**. There are no major racial differences between those who are disaffected compared to the overall population – meaning **disaffection is experienced across all racial and ethnic groups**.
2. **Disaffection is grounded in specific, lived experiences** of broken promises, deep distrust, financial struggle, and the sense that political leaders neither understand nor represent the working class. These experiences with politicians and elections mean that **frustration is the prevailing sentiment (64%)**, shaping how the disaffected experience politics and government.
3. **Disaffection is not the same as disengagement**. The disaffected participate in most forms of civic life at rates comparable to the general population – voting is the clear exception. **Only 56% of the disaffected intend to vote in 2026 compared to 65% of the overall population**. The disaffected have not checked out but are instead making choices about how best to use their energy and engage in civic life.
4. **Belonging\* is the strongest predictor of civic participation among the disaffected electorate**. Moving someone from the lowest measure of belonging to the highest results in a **25% increase in the likelihood of voting in 2026**.

\*Note: Belonging in this study is a composite variable that captures various dimensions of connection including personal (e.g. number of close friends), institutional (e.g. organizational membership), and community (e.g. cultural connection).

# 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

# 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**.

# 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

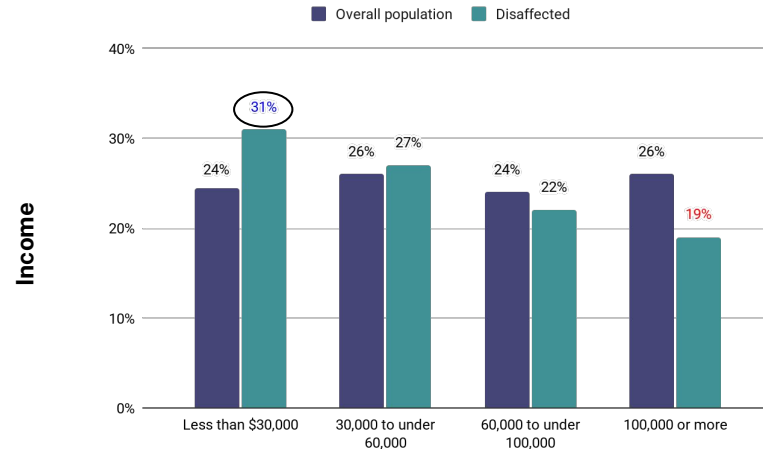
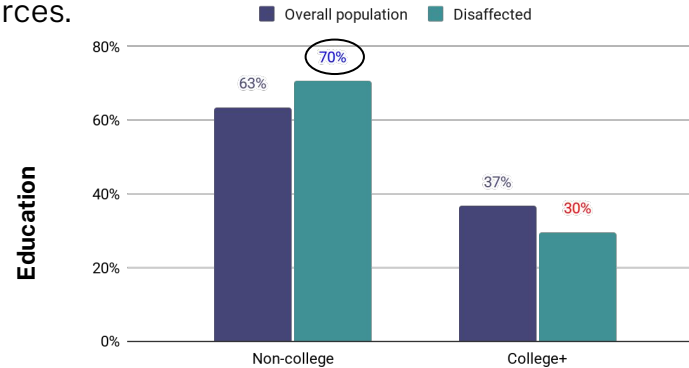
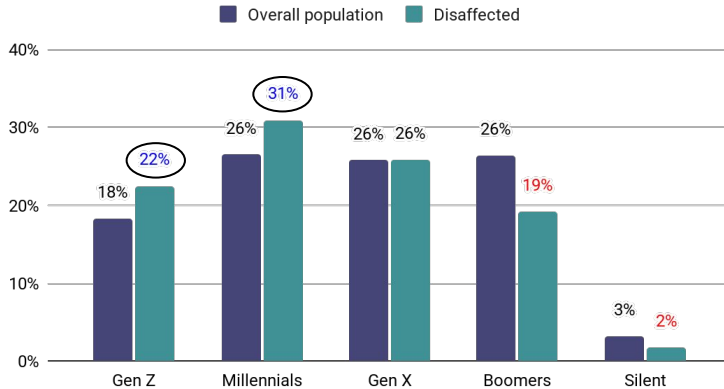
Reduced faith in  
institutions



# Who are the disaffected?

The disaffected tend to be younger and have fewer resources.

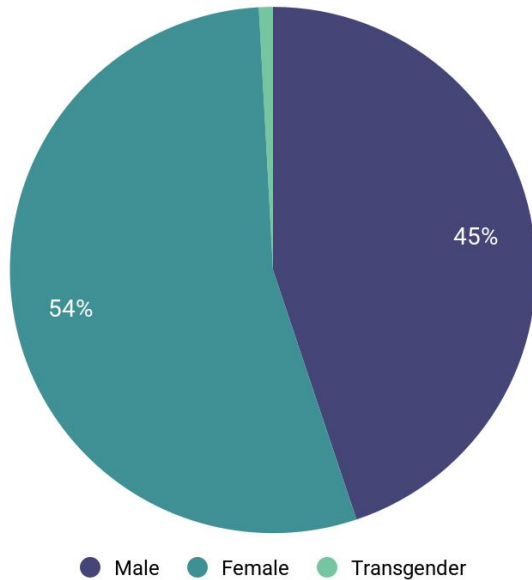
## Generation



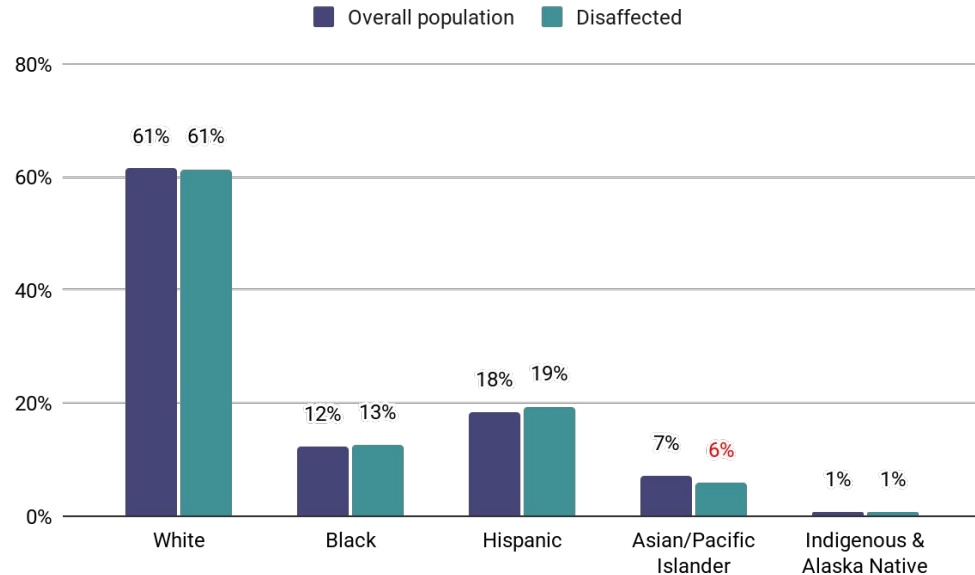
# Who are the disaffected?

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

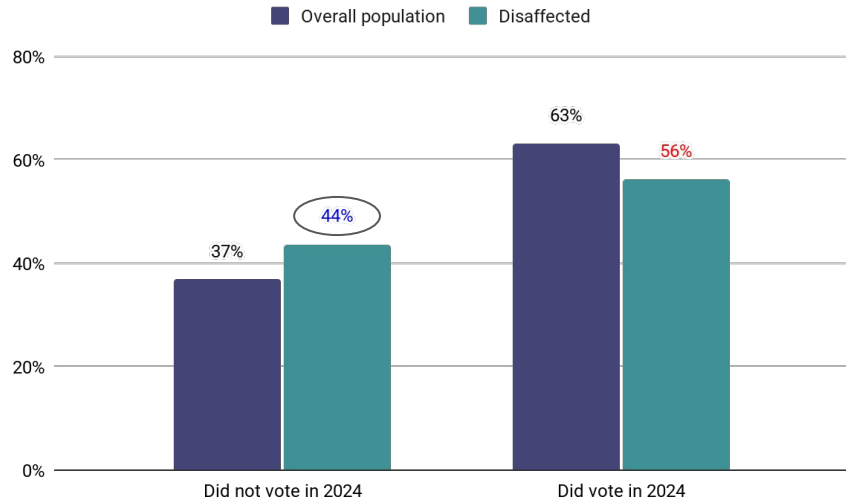


**Note:** Blue or Red indicates significantly higher or lower than adults overall at the 95% confidence level.  
**Note:** Nonsubstantive responses ('Other', 'Don't +now', 'Skipped', and 'Refused') were removed from this chart for clarity

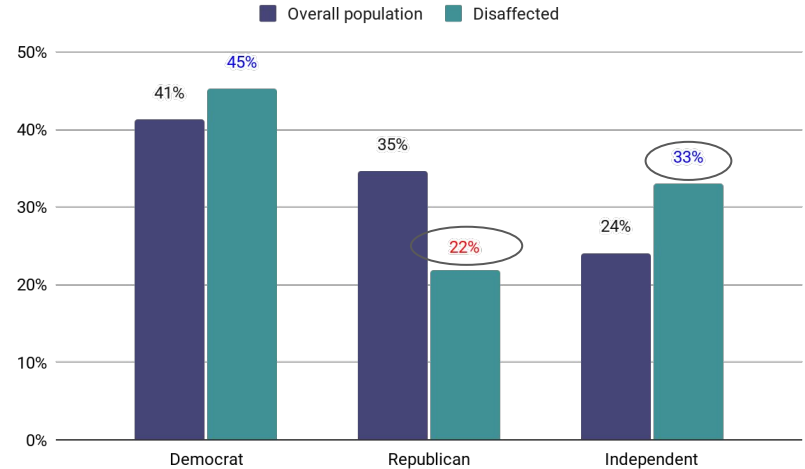
# Who are the disaffected?

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

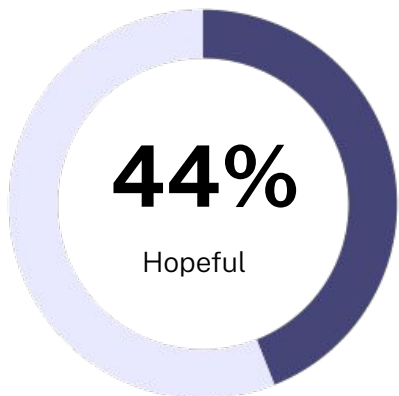


# Hope is waning for most people

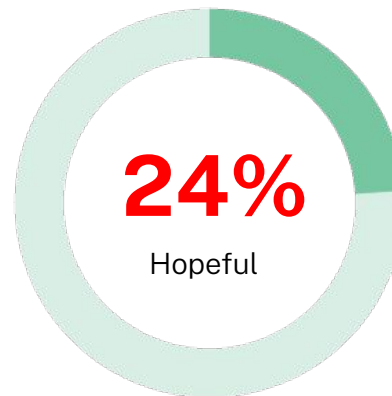
While the majority of people are worried about the future, this is an especially high sentiment among the disaffected.

*How hopeful or worried are you about the future?*

## Total population



## Disaffected

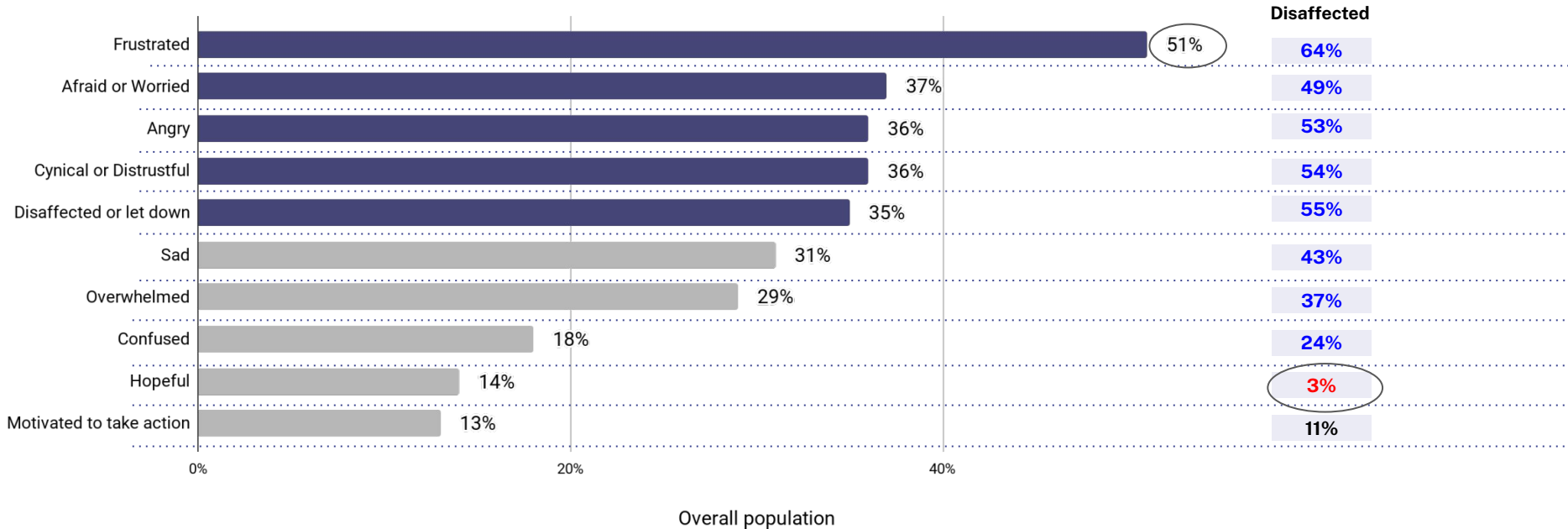


# Frustration is driving sentiment about politics



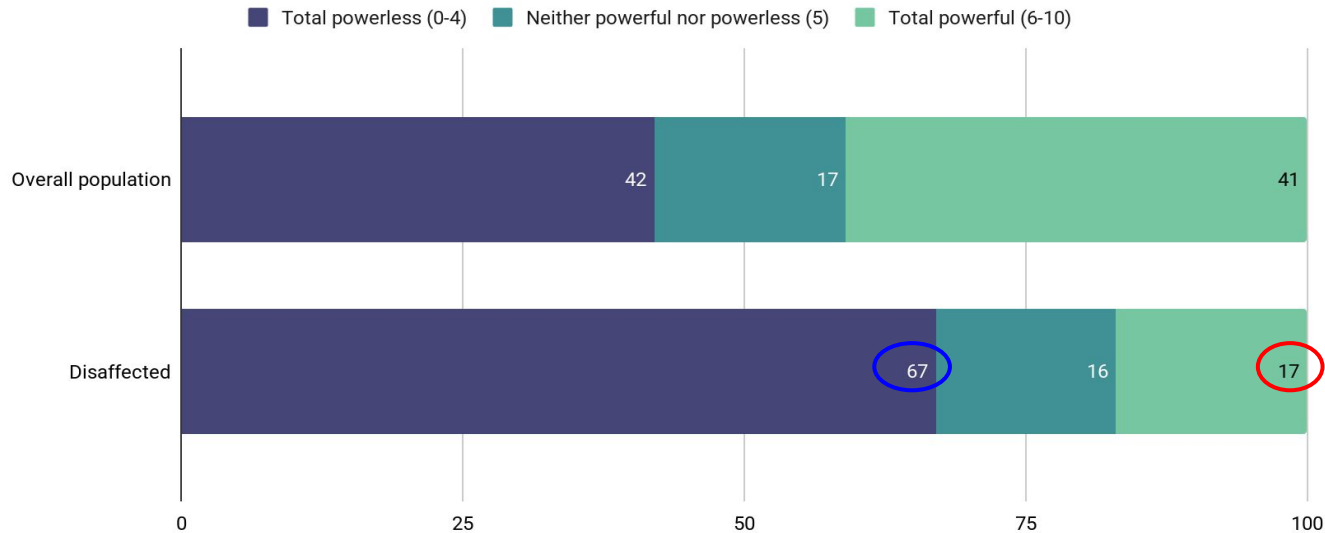
Emotions about politics and government are **broadly negative**, with frustration at the center.

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



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



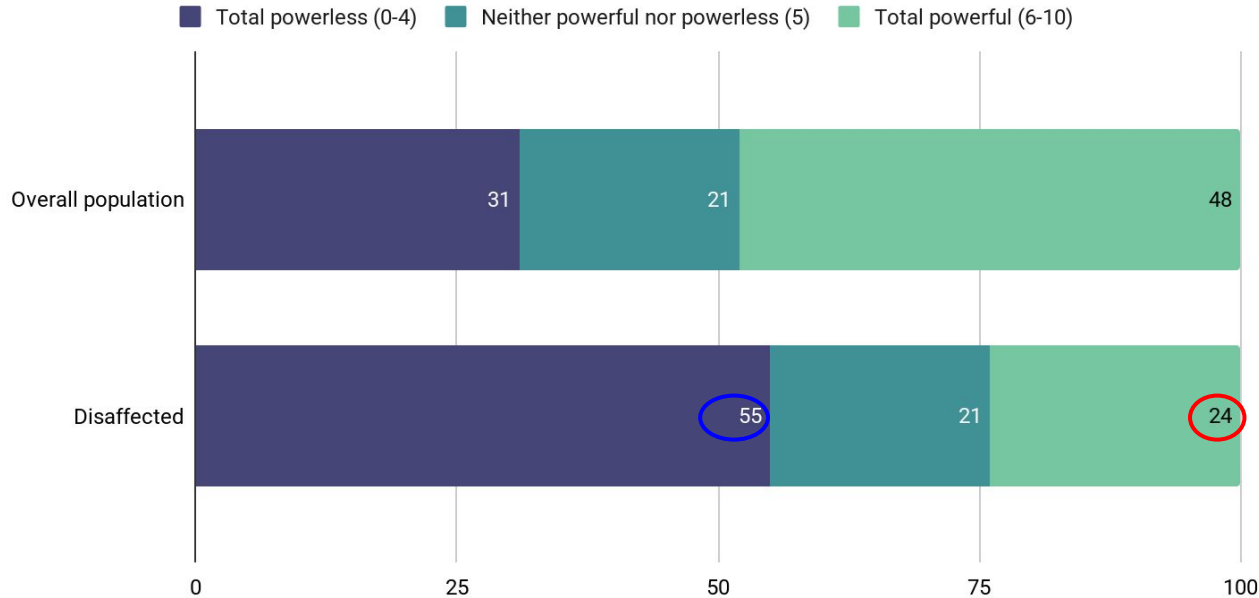
3.9 (mean)

# 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**

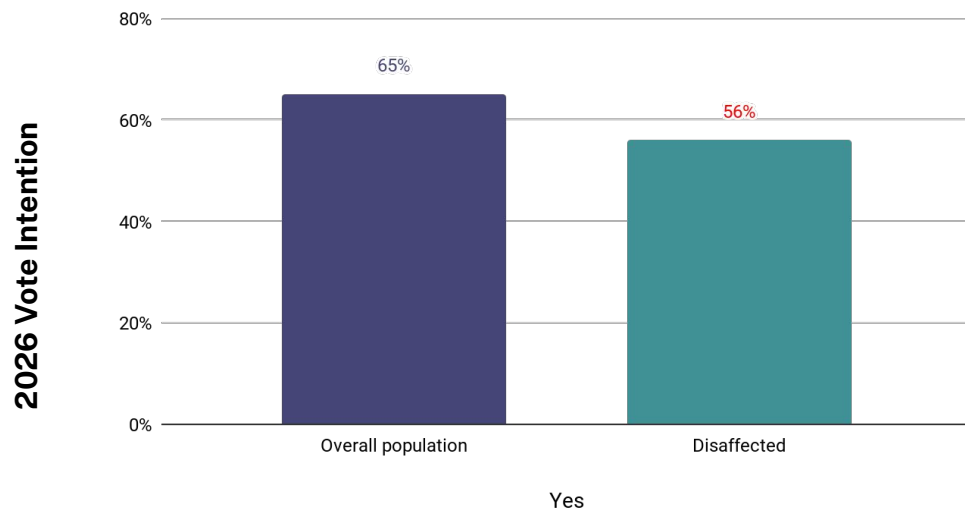
4.6 (mean)

# 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.

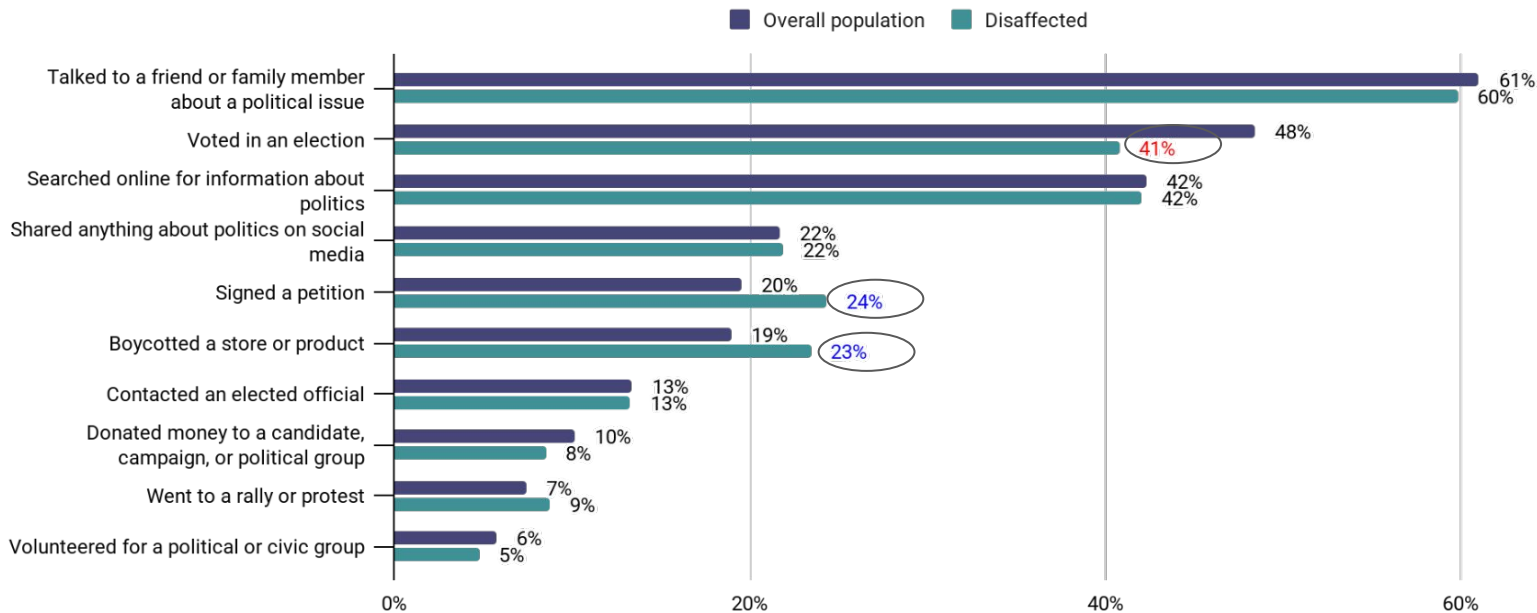
**Note:** Nonsubstantive responses ("Other," "Don't know," "Skipped," and "Refused" were removed from this chart for clarity)

# 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?*

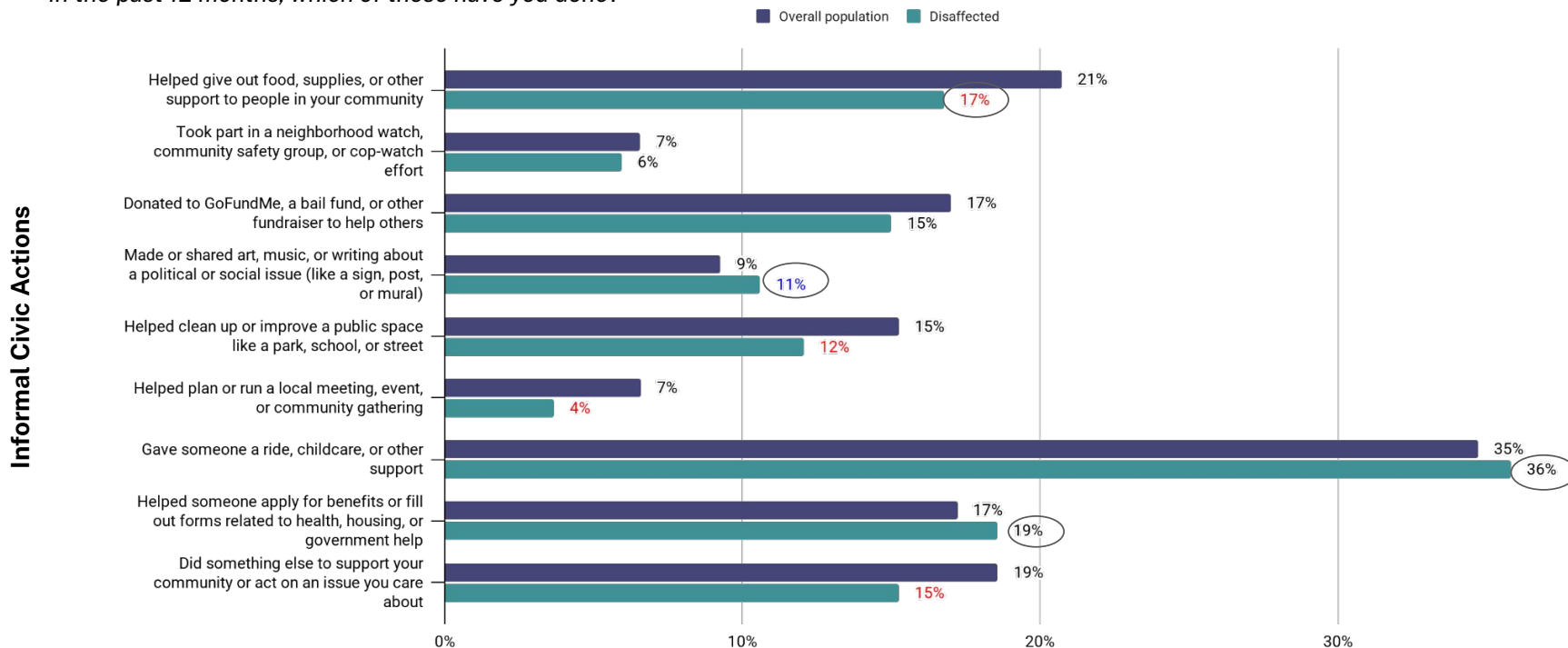
Traditional Political Actions



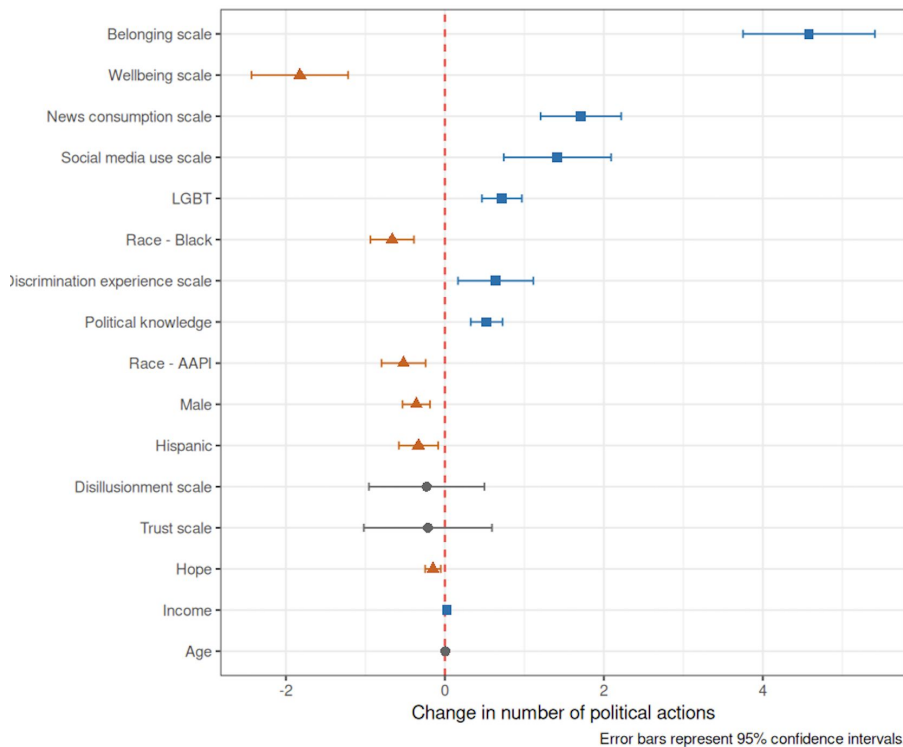
# Civic Participation

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?*



# Predicting Political Action among the Disaffected

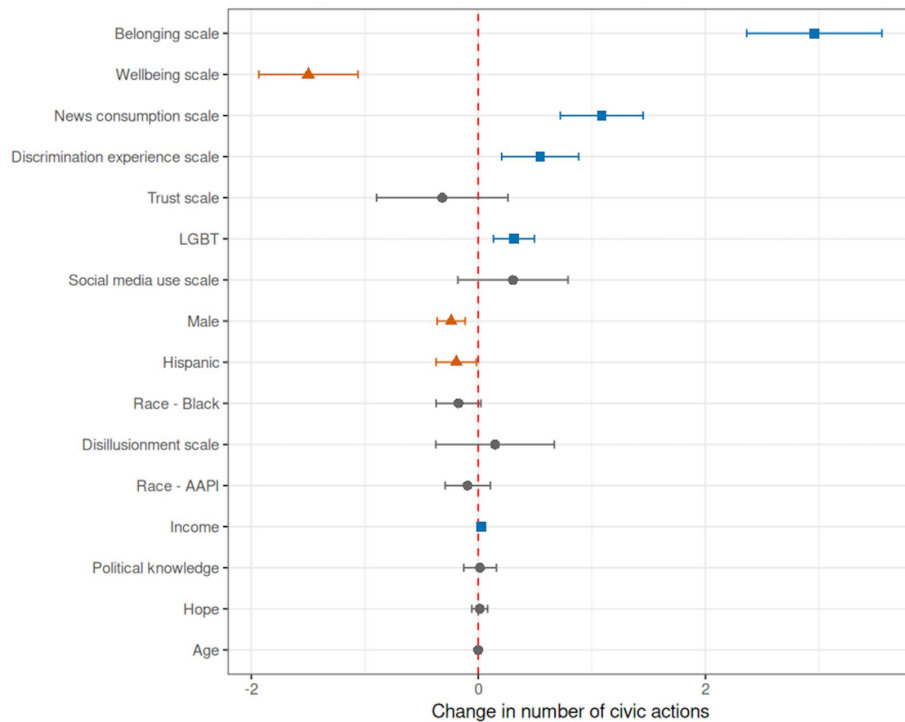


Effect significance

- 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

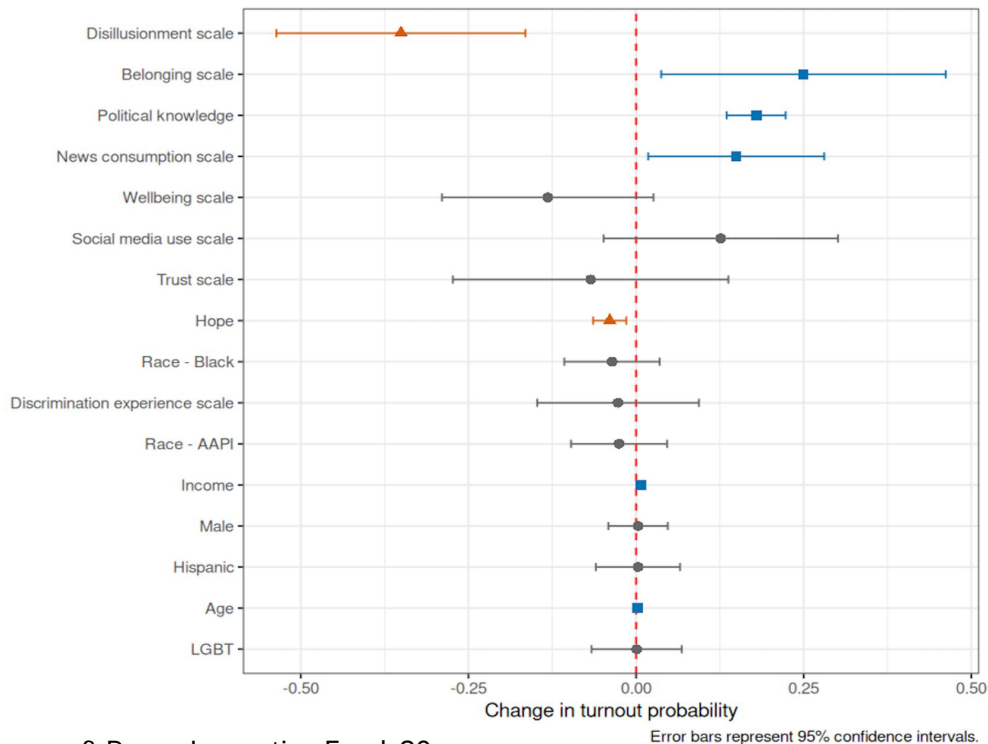


Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Effect significance  
■ Positive significant  
▲ Negative significant  
● Not significant

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

# Predicting 2026 Turnout, among the Disaffected



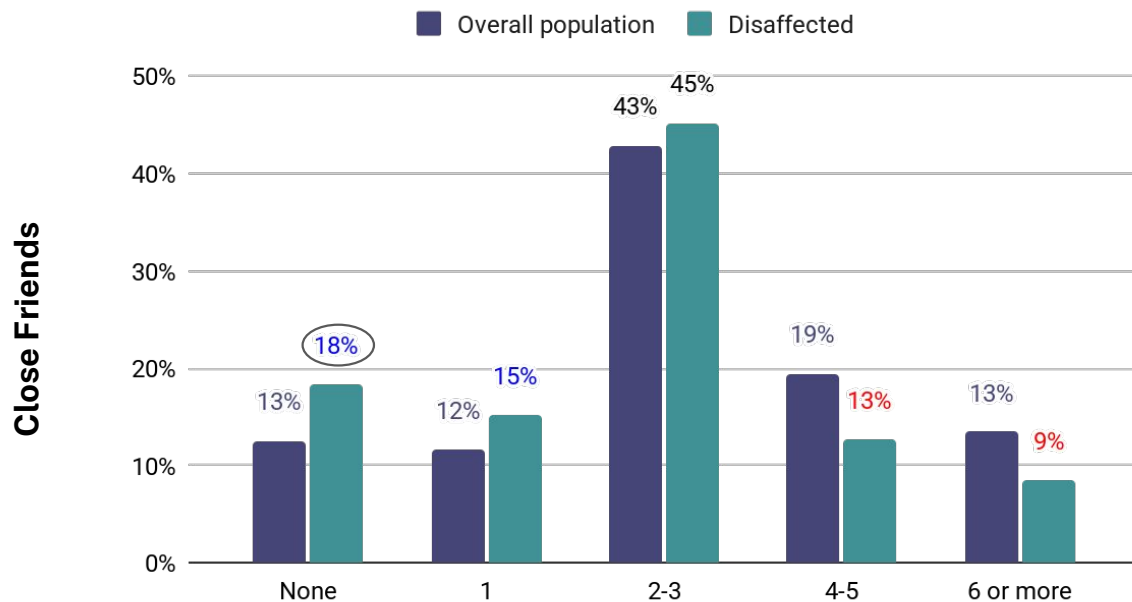
Effect significance

- 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



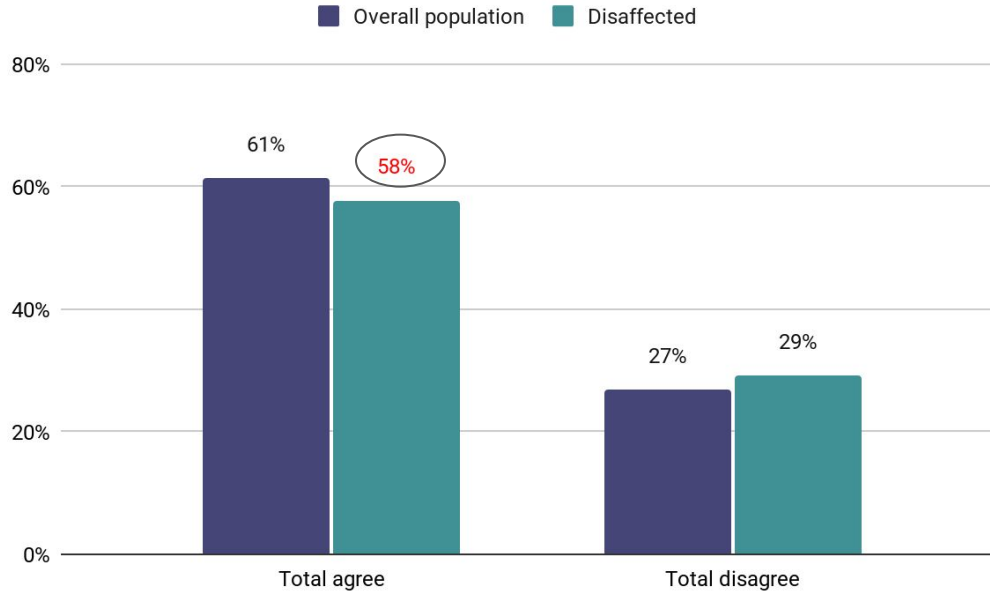
The disaffected are not connected to many community spaces, except online.

Are you a member of any of these groups? Select all that apply.	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.*



# 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](http://www.dpifund.org)  
[www.sojournstrategies.com](http://www.sojournstrategies.com)