

**Investigating Youth Portrayals in Election Reporting**

Jeremy Potter

School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University

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Dr. David Karpf

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## Introduction

How should we study the dilemma of low youth turnout? Youth and young adults participate in the elections at lower rates than other age ranges, a troubling sign for a democracy that relies on civic engagement across all demographics to ensure proper representation. Researchers have varying perspectives on why this trend may exist. Many focus on the activities that youth themselves undertake, studying different patterns of participation and behavior that translate into different engagement styles. This type of research focuses on cognition, media effects, and emphasizes differences in generational upbringing. Others focus primarily on the cost of voting, theorizing that for young voters, significant barriers exist that raise the opportunity cost and factor into young people's mental calculus.

However, a different way to approach the study of lacking participation from youth is in how youth are presented to the political world. This angle of study approaches the issue of low youth participation from the angle of institutions and asks what role they might play in affecting youth political engagement. Mass media outlets such as newspapers and TV are crucial for democratic engagement, often called the fourth estate for its relevance in framing political issues and engaging with the public. However, the press also can "create the public" by emphasizing which people's opinions are relevant, represented, and listened to by other Americans—as well as by decision makers. What this also means is that representations presented by the media have the potential to create and perpetuate roles of civic engagement through the processes of audience internalization, social cues, and influencing elite decision-making.

Studying youth portrayals in the press therefore opens a major avenue for understanding how youth political engagement is perceived and formed through the actions of mass media outlets. Biased portrayals of youth in campaign reporting specifically may produce the very

effects that lead to decreased youth engagement. In response to news deprioritizing the opinions and power of young voters, for example, political candidates and campaigns may consider youth less of a priority while campaigning. Issues of importance to youth may be hidden in the news, leading youth to believe they aren't being listened to. Young audiences may become frustrated with their portrayals in the media, leading to disengagement with the political sphere. Essentially, by portraying youth in certain ways, media outlets may play a role in relegating the demographic to the fringes of politics.

Additionally, studying media stereotypes of youth in election reporting therefore gives us actionable insights into boosting youth political participation. Because large media outlets are centralized hubs of power, changing media portrayals of youth to reduce stereotype presence is an easier task than modifying the civic behaviors of an entire generation. This research therefore not only has implications for explaining lacking youth participation in the political process, but also for providing actionable insights into boosting engagement. If the media do indeed play a role in perpetuating the sidelining of youth, research indicating as such could prove invaluable towards politically engaging a major demographic.

Media stereotypes can greatly affect group perception, which may contribute to many of the characteristics of youth participation in politics. These effects, if present, would be upstream of much of the individual-focused research that prioritizes study of the demographic, such as the media effects research mentioned prior. However, the study of media bias towards youth in election reporting is a relatively underdeveloped field. Few studies exist which track possible media bias towards youth in election reporting, despite the possible implications of such a bias.

I aim to understand how youth were portrayed in election coverage of the 2024 US Presidential election. I will perform content analysis techniques on a sample of articles from the

three most-circulated newspapers to understand which frames are most frequently used alongside a youth focus, if media coverage associates youth with incompetence or apathy, and if coverage of the youth vote is considered “important” reporting. These findings will help answer the question of whether media bias plays a role in creating stereotypes of youth in elections.

## **Literature Review**

### **Studying political media as used by youths**

A great deal of the literature surrounding youth in politics can be seen as components of a core question: why don't youth get involved in politics at the same rates as older people? For decades, youth voting rates have trailed behind older demographics, signaling that young people are not engaged in electoral politics at the same rates as other generations (Carpini, 2000; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Understanding why this trend occurs has been the topic of much scholarship. Within the field of political communication, two angles of this question are most frequently studied. The first is how youth and young adults react to, consume, or otherwise use various forms of political media, and the second is how this demographic incorporates media imagery into their lives and politics and creates their own culture. However, as Mazzarella (2003) explains, these two angles are not a complete picture of the youth-media-politics intersection, as “both of these traditions are audience-centered.”

A much less studied perspective on the intersection of youth, media, and politics is by studying the editorial choices made by journalists and media outlets on the topic. Rather than focusing on how young people interact with political media and examining the choices they make, this angle of study asks questions relating to how media organizations shape the role that youth come to inhabit in the political landscape. This perspective aims to determine whether these portrayals are accurate, which ideas appear most common amongst them, and what effects

such portrayals might create downstream of consumption. Because this angle of study focuses on editorial choices made by the media, key concepts relevant to this research question are framing and stereotyping.

### **Media Frames and Politics**

Understanding how the media discusses a subject is a key focus of political communication studies, as this greatly impacts public opinion on that subject. Examining how details are raised into prominence on a particular subject requires examining the language used by the media. Uncovering the decisions made about how to talk about a subject reveals the frame through which the media presents the issue to the public. Framing was organized from a “scattered conceptualization” into a conceptual framework for communications study by Entman (1993). Entman highlights the key necessities of a “communication frame,” detailing how they work to elevate the salience of certain details in relation to a larger subject of communication. By examining how certain language decisions made by the media elevate the salience of particular information, one can understand a wider picture of power relations between actors in a political space.

Entman explains in his pivotal work how framing plays an important role in the exertion and construction of political power, concluding that “power of a frame can be as great as that of language itself.” As such, much of the work that has followed his conceptualization of media frames has focused on evaluating their societal influences. Entman himself immediately followed this framework for media analysis by studying discussions around the U.S. Anti-Nuclear Movement (Entman, 1993). Another seminal work on framing examined discussions of a KKK rally, with one frame discussing the matter through a frame of “public order” and the other

through a frame of “free speech,” finding significant effect on participants’ attitudes (Nelson et. al., 1997).

Relating to coverage of political campaigns specifically, framing has shown to be a powerful tool of analysis for studying media effects. Druckman and Parkin (2005) focus on framing as well as other measures of media slant to analyze how media coverage affected voting patterns in the 2000 Minnesota senate election, focusing primarily on the frames used to cover candidates and campaigns. Callaghan and Schnell (2010) find that even in hotly contested issue areas where many parties have interests, “journalists and editors exert considerable power over the media’s construction of reality” through framing. Jarvis and Han (2018) claim that “journalists are power brokers” in elections, explaining how through their use of language in the political sphere, journalists’ depictions of groups play a major role in defining political roles in democracies.

Additionally, much scholarly work has been performed to define the limitations and nuances of media framing. Druckman and Nelson (2003) find that, on average, framing effects tend to be limited and temporary in the minds of audiences and can be challenged by interpersonal conversation. Chong and Druckman (2007) further clarify the process for identifying media frames and create a model for studying the effects of media frames on public opinion. Gross (2008) examines media frames, dividing them into episodic and thematic categories relating to individual events and larger issues respectively. Aarøe (2011) investigates the relative strength of these different types of media framing, finding that episodic framing tends to produce a stronger effect on audience opinion than thematic framing when strong emotional appeals are present, such as compassion, anger, or disgust. However, thematic framing tends to result in stronger effect on audience opinion when no emotional appeals are present. Due

to the subject of this study being youth voting, a clear example of thematic framing, this distinction has broad implications for study and indicates that research should be focused on identifying frames with non-emotional appeals.

### **Framing and Stereotyping: Bridging the Gaps**

Literature surrounding analysis of political media frames examining how media outlets portray (or stereotype) various types of voters is relatively lacking compared to analysis of how the media covers specific issues, candidates, or events. Rarely are groups of voters or “everyday citizens” studied as a subject being politically framed—instead, it is oft assumed that voters are only an audience for the media rather than a subject of reporting. However, especially in election reporting, this is far from the case, with news articles frequently reporting on voter turnout, attitudes, and decision-making processes, often broken down by demographic. Some research suggests that the formation and reinforcement of stereotypes describing voter groups may have serious implications for democratic participation. Jarvis and Han (2018) explain that the language used surrounding the political sphere shapes how citizens learn their political roles. Thus, stereotypes about young voters disseminated by mass media outlets may play a significant role in shaping the behavior of the audience.

As tools of media analysis, stereotypes and communication frames have been frequently connected by scholars (Abraham & Appaiah, 2006; Yang, 2015; Bullock et al., 2001). It is in this context that many useful concepts and connections relevant to my research question are found. This scholarship examines how news framing interacts with societal problems and builds depictions that lack complexity or otherwise perpetuate stereotypes surrounding issues such as racism and poverty.

Framing analysis (and particularly thematic framing analysis) proves to be a useful tool in this endeavor due to the nature of “young voter” or “young activist” as a demographic, as a potential audience, and as a civic activity, whereas most categories for which stereotypes are studies only engage with the first two categories. Some analysis of media framing of elections demonstrates thematic overlaps with earlier questions surrounding the youth vote. Cappella and Jamieson (1996) establish and criticize the presence of the “strategic game” frame in election reporting, linking a lack of substantive issue-based coverage and “horse race reporting” to decreased civic engagement and increased apathy. Furthering upon this line of study, Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2011) perform a comparative analysis of election frames in American and Swedish media, finding that American media often utilizes more strategic game frames than conflict frames. Studying strategy-game frames may be of interest in my research due to its association with disengagement from politics.

One concept that bridges the gap between media framing and stereotyping is delegitimization. This framework has been used previously to study media framing of the womens’ rights movement, finding that mass media organizations played a significant role in marginalizing feminists and reinforcing anti-feminist status quo imagery (Ashley & Olson, 1998). This study examined media portrayals of feminist groups, comparing them to portrayals of anti-feminist groups in the same time periods, and finding that the media played a role in perpetuating status quo stereotypes relating to the feminist movement. Additionally, this study found that through editorial choices, the media emphasized the importance of antifeminist figures while diminishing the importance of feminist activists. Another notable work in this field is Brown and Mourão (2021), which focuses on Black civil rights protests in the US and finds media framing to significantly impact audience opinion formation. Their work is relevant in

particular as it draws a connection between media frames of legitimacy and media consumption effects, bringing attention to the consequences of biased portrayals of political groups in the media.

### **Media Framing of Youth**

As Kousis and Giugni (2020) explain, “what youth say in the media is a means to communicate their affirmation of, or discontent with existing policies, national governments[...] and thus to express themselves politically.” A lack of adequate or accurate coverage translates into a lack of expression and therefore a lack of political power in the hands of a demographic. Coverage of youth actors is therefore most often studied from the perspective of identifying gaps between media portrayals and self-asserted portrayals. Some research outside of the field of political communication highlights trends in the media portrayal of youth that undermine their ability to act as effective political actors. This type of research differs from studying youth frames in political reporting but is nonetheless relevant due to its role in identifying common tropes and stereotypes used by the media to characterize young people. For instance, Thurlow (2007) studies the technologization of young people, with media portraying youth as unable to control their use of the internet or other technologies. Understanding what types of negative portrayals of youth may appear in media coverage is highly relevant to my research question and will be a key factor in my research design.

Additionally, a significant amount of scholarship on the intersection of youth, media, and politics examines the portrayal of youth, and particularly minoritized youths, as criminalized, delinquent, or simply “more involved with crime”—even as victims. Ferrel (1997), meanwhile, looks at this intersection of issues with a cultural analysis perspective, examining how the media outlets and state apparatuses appear to work in tandem to exclude minoritized youth voices and

portray minority culture (which is often driven by youth) as criminal. Wayne et. al (2008) focuses on the UK's mass media, finding a strong association between portrayals of youth and association with crime. A fifty-year content analysis of Dutch newspapers (Levinsen & Wien, 2011) similarly found a strong emphasis on crime, accidents, and frames that related youth to "moral decay."

While such connections between youth and crime are unlikely to appear as a major trend in election reporting specifically, this frame is still one to keep in mind when conducting analysis for two reasons. Firstly, its prevalence among depictions of minority youth highlights the need for analysis which can identify racist and biased tropes. Analysis should be performed knowing that depictions of youth may differ based on what demographics specifically are being highlighted. Secondly, as Kelly (2006) finds, youth become frustrated with misrepresentations of their lifestyles as "troubled or troubling." This type of ostracization, if present in political reporting, could play a role in creating the patterns of low civic and political engagement which have been identified to be common among youth.

### **Framing Politically Engaged Youth**

Much of the literature surrounding media coverage of youth engagement in civics and the political process focuses on high-profile activism campaigns rather than election reporting. These studies are notable to this study's research question for their focus on the same demographic and uncovering of media frames used to discuss politically active youth. However, relevant differences in context, such as the focus on non-electoral political action as well as geographic disparities leave the relevance of these frames in American electoral politics still to be questioned. I aim to determine whether or not these frames continue to apply to youth in the context of American election reporting as well as in the broader political media landscape.

The most prominent activist issue among those studied is likely the youth-led climate movement, with a great deal of scholarship examining the movement's media coverage. Much scholarship has been conducted to analyze the media's response to youth-led protests around the world. Bergmann and Ossewaarde (2020) examine German news on Greta Thunberg and the FridaysForFuture movement using a critical discourse analysis approach, finding a high prevalence of ageist depictions and disregard for youth claims. Santos et al. (2023) similarly analyzes global coverage of youth activism on climate, finding similarly that "in some countries, news outlets have failed to adequately represent their political voice." Cushion (2007) examines a different activist movement—young anti-Iraq war protestors in Britain—finding that media frames became more hostile to protestors when the UK government began supporting the war effort.

Some analysis focuses on the political stances of mass media organizations and examines whether this variable affects media coverage and framing of youth in politics. Bosi et. al (2019) is a comparative study focusing on three European countries, finding that center-left newspapers generally recognize the agency of youth more than center-right newspapers. Additionally, Bosi et al. find that media portrayals of youth as "disaffected by politics" typically come from non-youth actors and is therefore a "social construction made by adults, the media and other institutional actors." This analysis is highly relevant for the purpose of this study in identifying key trends in news portrayals of politically active youth.

A great deal of scholarship which directly relates to my research question was conducted in the aftermath of the 2004 US presidential election, where youth turnout surged (Lopez et al., 2005). Several studies examined media portrayals and engagements with young voters from different angles. One notable study in this sphere is Bystrom and Dimitrova (2007), who

conducted a content analysis of Iowa newscasts to gauge the prominence of youth-focused election reporting. They found that even in an election where youth turnout was relatively emphasized, television news coverage showed limited focus on youth and rarely used youth as sources for reporting. It is also worth noting that Bystrom and Dimitrova attributed these patterns not only to media or elite choices (as is often the case in framing research) but also to consumption trends, saying that “[their] results show that television appears not to target young voters and that young voters use Internet and interpersonal channels for political information.” This discussion forms the connections between depictions of youth in the media and trends of consumption. Similarly, Williams (2007) analyzes print and television articles covering young voters during the same election, finding a high presence of negative framing of the youth turnout, essentially emphasizing how youth did not show up in the numbers of other age demographics despite the year’s relatively high youth turnout. This could indicate that news organizations perpetuate the idea of youth voting in low numbers, even when voter turnout trends in the opposite direction.

### **Purpose of Research**

Understanding what frames and stereotypes about youth appear in election coverage could uncover one factor in why youth voter turnout consistently ranks behind older demographics. While most researchers studying this issue have connected the trend to other factors, including but not limited to civic education, lifestyle upheavals, differing political engagement styles, and an increased opportunity cost of voting (Carpini 2000), one connection which I believe is understudied is in how the media may or may not reinforce perceptions of the youth vote and contribute to perpetuating the status quo of lagging youth participation. If media

messaging does indeed contain biases against young voters, this could lead to a variety of outcomes which would result in a vote-suppressing effect.

Biased media portrayals of youth may play a role in fostering apolitical sentiment, due to how news perceptions of a demographic are internalized by that demographic audience. Youth may be sent the message that their role is on the sidelines of political discussion or become frustrated with a lack of accurate portrayals of their needs and wants. In addition to self-perception impacts, portrayals of youth as apathetic or apolitical may play a role in decreased youth appeals from candidates. Because the media and political campaigns are interconnected, with campaigns looking to the former to comprehend the mixed demands of the electorate, biased portrayals from the media could have large impacts in the formation of candidates' campaign strategies. Candidates who perceive youth as not important may spend more time appealing to the issues which older Americans prioritize, which leads youth to disengage as they feel not listened to. Additionally, candidates who perceive youth voters as incompetent or unable to engage with politics at a substantive level may adjust their messaging in a way that prompts disengagement from young voters. With these concerns in mind, the first step towards addressing them is determining how the media portrays young voters and whether or not these portrayals contain bias or negative associations that could produce such effects.

### **Hypotheses**

I aim to evaluate whether or not newspaper coverage tends to delegitimize young people's participation in elections through biased portrayals. To analyze the accuracy of this theory, I selected several research objectives:

**Hypothesis 1: Young people will be portrayed as of low importance in politics more often than they will be portrayed to be of high importance.**

This hypothesis was selected because other studies which examine the portrayals of demographics in the media have identified importance as a key phenomenon to tracking bias. This metric was measured through a combination of several factors, including how close to the top of the article references to youth are found. Common editorial practice in newswriting is to include the most important information on a topic close to the top of a paper, as many readers will not read beyond the headline, subtitle, and/or initial paragraphs (George Mason University). Thus, the position of youth mentions can be used as a proxy for understanding how newsworthy media organizations deem young voters. To assess this statistic, articles on election coverage that reference youth were coded based on the proximity of these references to the beginning of the article. This value was formatted as a percentage indicating how much of the article must be read before a youth mention appears. Additionally, when in print, where the article was placed in the paper was also measured, with “front-page” articles indicating more importance. This second criterion has been directly associated with importance in previous studies (Ashley and Olson 1998). This metric was used to measure the importance of articles specifically focused on youth voting. The final metric used to quantify coverage importance was explicit mentions of the importance of youth voters, with some examples being a call to action for youth to vote or describing youth as a key demographic in the electorate.

Articles considered to portray youth as a “low-importance demographic” met all of the following criteria:

- If categorized in print and youth-focused, the article was not on the front page of the section it was printed on.
- If not youth-focused, the article had its first mention of youth more than halfway through the article.

- The article contained no explicit mentions of the importance of the youth demographic in voting.

**Hypothesis 2: Young people will be portrayed to be incompetent more often than they will be portrayed to be competent.**

**Hypothesis 3: Young people will be portrayed to be apathetic towards politics more often than they will be portrayed to be invested in politics.**

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were formulated based on the prediction that portrayals of politically active young people as incompetent or apathetic might reflect media stereotypes of youth identified in the literature (Mazzarella 2007). As such, both focus on analysis on the level of themes, and may as such require additional justification to be provided during the coding phase of this research. Hypothesis 2 will take a number of variables into account to judge portrayals of competence. Perhaps most obviously, portrayals of young people as naive, wishful, or indecisive will contribute to this metric. Portrayals of youth that trivialize their voting decisions, their issue priorities, or their concerns will also constitute “incompetence” portrayals.

However, another trend identified in the literature to contribute towards perceptions of incompetence is the denial of agency to youth, whether this be directly through talking about youth without using youth voices or by portraying youth as “technologized” and incapable of making relevant decisions (Mazzarella 2007, Thurlow 2007). In addition, portrayals of youth voting decisions that focus exclusively on pop culture events will fall into this category as they trivialize youth experiences and portray youth as shallow consumers of entertainment rather than active participants in democracy. Note that this criteria requires an exclusive focus on this metric, meaning that articles with a focus on entertainment media as it relates to youth voting are not

automatically grouped into this category—only those that fail to include substantive discussion on policy, candidates, or other considerations.

Hypothesis 3 similarly will be measured through a combination of multiple indicators of apathy, involvement, or investment. Articles which attribute the observed lower rates of youth electoral participation to apathy or other measures of “mood” will obviously be categorized as an example of the above. Articles where youth are depicted to be “deprioritizing politics” will also be categorized as “apathetic portrayals.” In addition, articles which mention youth “struggling” in some way to politically participate may fall into this category, provided that explanations for their struggles are not meaningfully attributed. This final categorization, for example, may pertain to coverage that addresses a campaign's struggle to mobilize youth voters without exploring potential causes for this issue. These articles are coded as apathy portrayals because in the absence of an explanation, such articles establish a direct connection between youth and a lack of participation.

**Hypothesis 4: “Strategy-game” frames will appear in articles with a specific focus on young people more than they will in articles without such a focus.**

This hypothesis was formulated by making connections between the media effects of election coverage framing and speculated causes of decreased youth participation in elections. Cappella and Jamison (1997, 1) identify a specific framing technique in political reporting that they then proceed to connect to increased cynicism in audiences: the strategy-game frame. If strategy-game framing is indeed more prevalent in election coverage with a focus on youth, this could serve as a potential source of cynicism (or contribute to a stereotype of youth as cynical).

To test this hypothesis, clearly and consistently identifying strategy-game framing is key. Cappella and Jamison (1997, 1) identify strategy-game framing to be present in articles where

“policy positions are interpreted as a means of gaining a voter block to advance one's candidacy or retain a position in the polls. Candidates' words and actions are seen as the outward signs of strategic intent and are cast as maneuvers rather than as forms of self-expression.” To identify strategy-game framing, my analysis focused on how candidates’ motivations are attributed as well as the language used to refer to specific voter blocks—for example, youth. Language that describes demographics as being “won” or “lost” by certain candidates is a clear indicator of this type of framing. Articles which include many of these indicators or place these indicators at high levels of prominence (in the title, byline, or initial paragraphs) were flagged as containing a strategy-game frame. Strategy-game frame presence was then evaluated in association with whether or not the article was youth focused (see Hypothesis 1) to test the hypothesis.

### **Sampling Procedure**

I performed this content analysis on a sample of news articles focused on the 2024 US election cycle. Articles from an approximately two-year period (Jan 1, 2023 - present) were selected from the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and the New York Times. These papers were identified to be the three most circulated national newspapers in terms of print subscriptions in late 2022, just before the beginning of the sampling period ([Turvill 2022](#)). Studying the coverage of politically active young people in these newspapers thus gives us an avenue to study the media frames being seen by the greatest proportion of Americans.

Samples were selected from the US Newsstream database, with search terms "youth" OR "millenials" OR "Gen z" OR "generation Z" OR "under 35" OR "youth voting" in the subjects “elections” or “campaigns.” This search initially returned 417 results. However, due to duplicates, incorrect matches, and some articles lacking any mention of youth voting or young voters, this sample was narrowed substantially to 62 articles containing mentions of youth voters.

The first ten articles were initially examined to develop coding criteria for the sample at large, and then recoded once criteria were finalized.

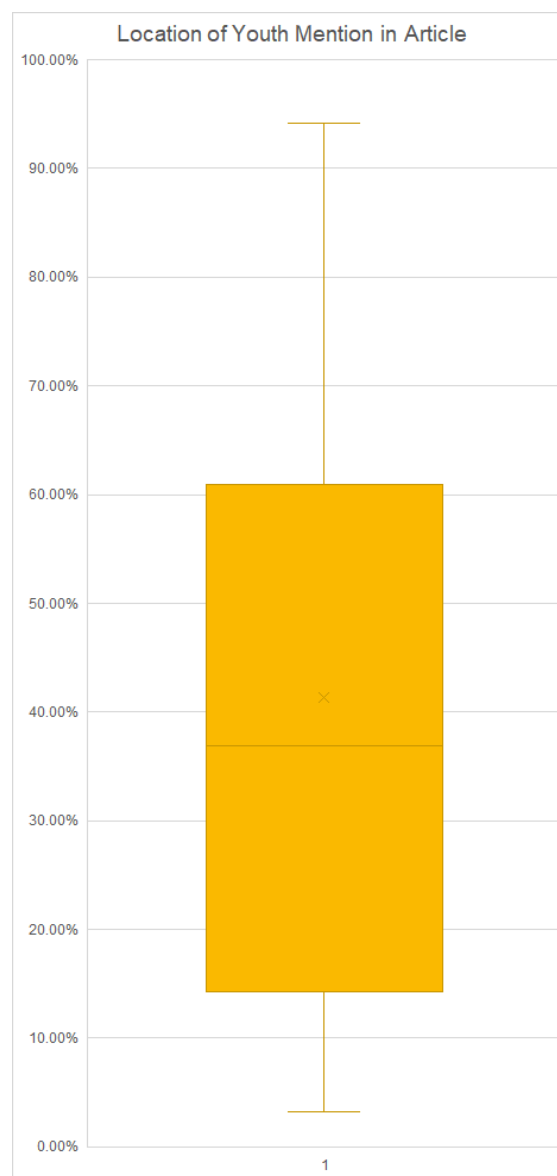
## Findings

My findings on this study's three hypotheses will be discussed as follows.

### Hypothesis 1: Importance Findings

Of the 62 articles in the sample, 39 (62.9%) were identified to portray youth as a high-importance demographic. This finding heavily contrasts with Hypothesis 1, that the media dominantly portrays youth to be of low importance in election reporting, instead indicating that the media relatively consistently portrays the youth vote as a high-importance demographic.

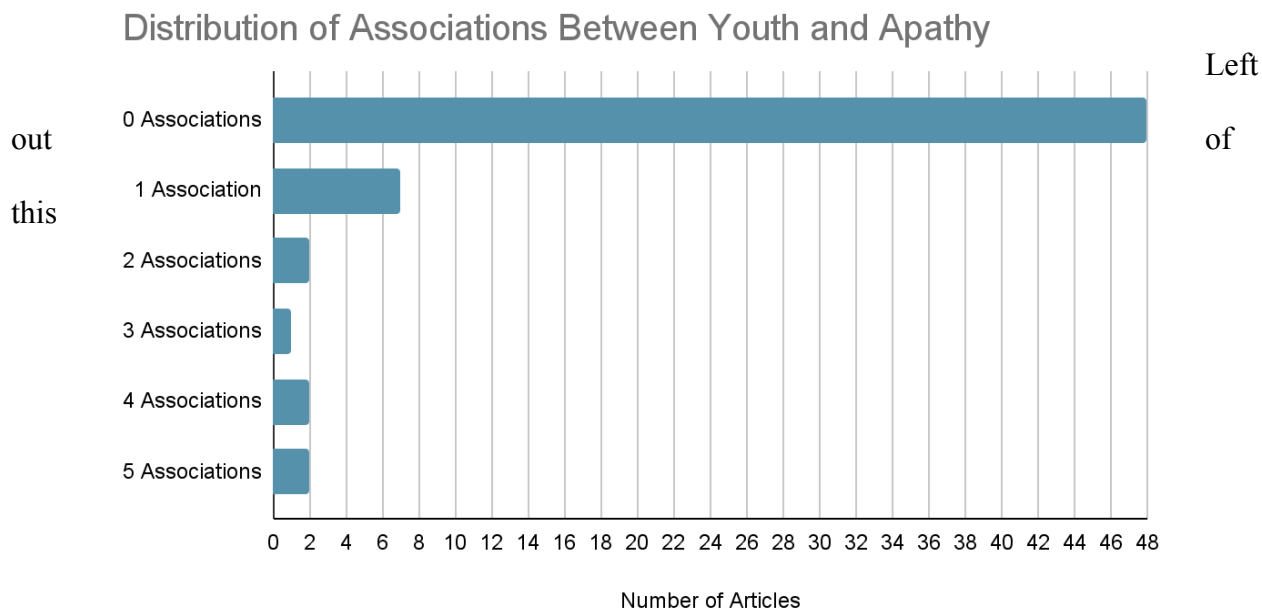
The most common indicator of a high-importance portrayal of youth was explicit mentions in the article, with 25 out of 39 articles being noted as such due to mentioning the youth demographic to be important at least once. First youth-mention placement (one of the metrics used to measure importance) averaged around 40%. Additionally, also notable was the high proportion of front-page print articles with a youth focus. Of the 22 articles identified in print, 5 appeared on the front page of their section, and 3 appeared on the front page and were focused on youth.



These results provide no support for Hypothesis 1. This indicates that articles portraying youth as a low-importance demographic in the 2024 election cycle do not make up a majority of articles mentioning youth.

**Hypotheses 2 and 3: Apathy and Incompetence Findings**

32 associations between youth and apathy were identified in the sample. Of the 62 articles, 48 (77.4%) contained no associations between youth and apathy. The distribution of these associations in all articles sampled is shown below. The presence of these associations suggests that I had significantly overestimated the prominence of apathy-driven portrayals of youth in the media. While depictions of youth apathy were not uncommon in the sample, they did not appear in a majority of articles as predicted.

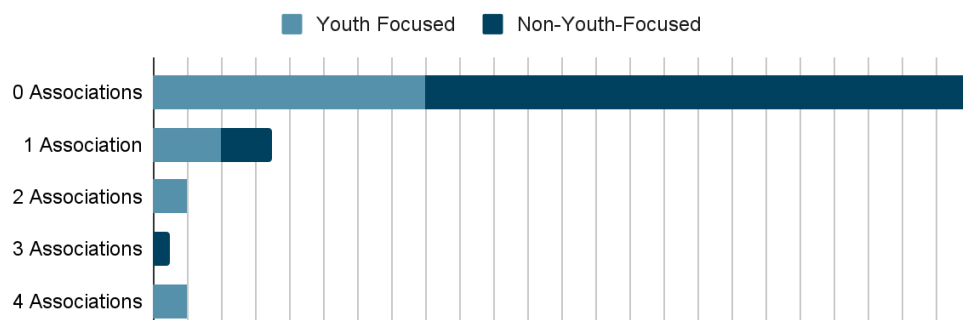


chart, however, is the data regarding the presence of apathy and incompetence associations in youth-focused articles. Such data allow for a deeper understanding of the extent to which these associations are embedded in discussions about youth, as opposed to cursory or superficial references that might be found in broader or less focused contexts. By concentrating on articles

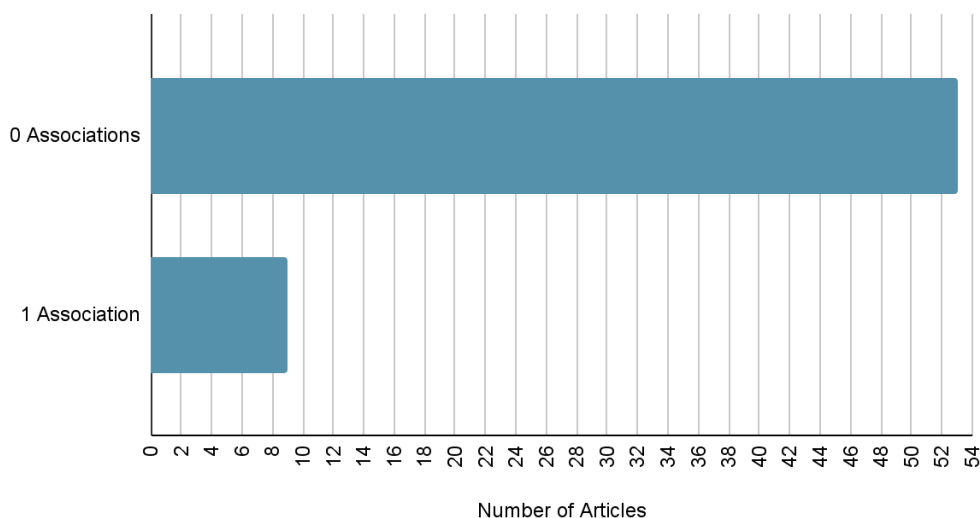
with a specific focus on youth, it becomes possible to examine how these themes are presented with greater intentionality and depth, shedding light on the potential implications of such portrayals for public perceptions of young people. Moreover, this distinction ensures that the analysis excludes fleeting or incidental mentions, which may not accurately capture the full spectrum of how apathy and incompetence are framed in relation to youth. The following presents the same distribution, but with a further breakdown according to the presence or absence of a youth-specific focus in the articles under consideration.

### Youth Focused and Non-Youth-Focused Articles and Their Associations With Apathy

As



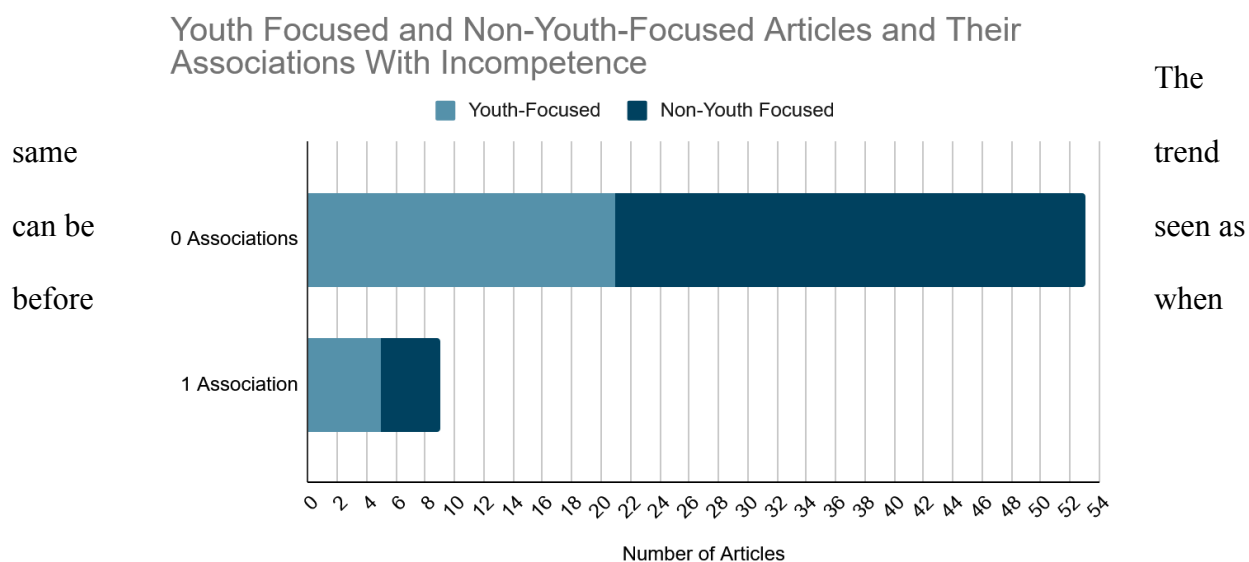
### Distribution of Associations Between Youth and Incompetence



anticipated, the proportion of articles that exhibit trends of apathy in youth-focused publications is notably higher than in the overall sample, with only 16 out of 36 (61.5%) articles containing

no associations between apathy and youth. This data confirms the initial expectation that youth-focused articles are more likely to present such associations compared to the broader sample. However, even after conducting this analysis, it becomes apparent that portrayals of youth associated with apathy still represent a minority within media depictions, even when only considering articles that focus on youth. This finding presents a significant counterpoint to Hypothesis 3, which had posited that apathy-related portrayals of youth would be dominant within media narratives surrounding young people. Despite the higher frequency of apathy associations in youth-focused articles, the overall rarity of such portrayals challenges the assumption that media narratives consistently emphasize apathy as a defining characteristic of youth.

An even more striking rejection was that of Hypothesis 2, which posited that youth would frequently be portrayed as incompetent. The data countering this claim can be seen in the above chart. Portrayals of youth as incompetent were notably rarer than those of youth apathy. Specifically, 53 of the 62 articles (85.5%) contained no references to youth incompetence.



separating the incompetence-association findings by focus. The presence of incompetence associations in youth-focused articles increased slightly, with 21 of 26 articles (80.8%) zero associations.

One key finding of this analysis is that, between the two potential negative portrayals (apathy and incompetence) media outlets are significantly more inclined to depict youth as apathetic rather than incompetent in election coverage. Moreover, apathy associations are likely to appear in multiples within the same article, whereas this phenomenon was never observed for incompetence associations.

#### **Hypothesis 4: Strategic-Game Frame Presence**

The articles in the sample were categorized based on their focus on youth, with 26 articles identified as specifically youth-focused, while the remaining 36 articles only referenced youth voting. Within the group of 26 youth-focused articles, a notable 16 (61.5%) employed a strategic-game frame to discuss the election cycle. This frame, which highlights the electoral process as a competitive game, was also present in 19 of the 36 non-youth-focused articles, or 52.7%. At first glance, these findings align with the trend anticipated by Hypothesis 4, which suggests a higher prevalence of the strategic-game frame in youth-focused coverage compared to general articles mentioning youth voting.

However, upon further analysis, this observed difference was not statistically significant according to the chi-square test, which returned a p-value of 0.49. This p-value is far below the threshold typically used to assert statistical significance, suggesting that the relationship between article focus and the use of the strategic-game frame may not be as robust as initially hypothesized. Despite this, the observed trend may warrant further investigation, as the initial

difference in framing patterns implies that additional research could either provide evidence for or challenge the fourth hypothesis more definitively, provided a larger sample size.

### **Discussion**

First, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study, as well as possible errors made in methodology. One significant shortcoming lies in the inability to effectively measure how media organizations portray the importance and/or significance of the youth vote. This limitation arises from the assumption that media coverage, in general, is unlikely that reporters or editors will downplay the importance of a subject being reported on. As this study focused exclusively on coverage that included mentions of youth, this approach inadvertently introduced a positive bias into the metrics used to estimate importance. Another limitation of this study lies in the overestimation of the effect size related to the associations between apathy, incompetence, and youth, as identified in the literature on youth portrayals in the media. While associations between incompetence, apathy, and youth were present in the articles sampled, neither trend reached the anticipated level of prevalence, as no more than fifty percent of the articles included such associations, contrary to the expectations set forth in the study's hypotheses.

I realized after undertaking this study that future research aiming to measure portrayals of the importance of the youth vote should involve evaluating whether mentions of the youth vote were proportionate to those of other demographic groups within the broader spectrum of media coverage, rather than simply assessing articles that specifically centered on youth or included incidental mentions of young people. Incorporating an approach would provide a comprehensive understanding of how the media treats the significance of youth voting within the larger context of election reporting. Alternatively, another approach that might provide a better understanding

of youth importance portrayals in election reporting is comparing the prevalence of the explicit references to importance identified in this study with those of different demographics. Such an analysis would provide insight into whether youth are uniquely highlighted as important or overlooked in a broader electoral context.

One final change I would advise for future research on this question is incorporating a multi-stage coding process, rather than focusing solely on identifying trends that were identified prior to when coding began. If I were to have taken this alternative approach, I might have uncovered more significant data points relating to underexplored themes and associations and made more meaningful discoveries. Such a strategy would have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of which media portrayals of youth are dominant, particularly if those portrayals did not align with the preliminary assumptions of apathy and incompetence. For example, one trend identified late into the coding process was the association of the youth vote with specific issues identified as not focal to most other voters: the proposed TikTok ban, the Israel/Palestine conflict, and climate change being notable examples of such. Several articles in the sample were also flagged for including a number of sexist elements, for instance, trivializing young women's political opinions into matters of dating choice. A research design that allowed for the identification and incorporation of these trends into the content analysis could have provided more insight into how media characterize the youth vote.

Now, let us proceed with a comprehensive evaluation of the accuracy of the hypotheses proposed in the study. Hypothesis 1, which posited that youth would be depicted as an insignificant demographic in election coverage, did not receive support from the data analyzed. In fact, the findings contradict this initial assumption, as they reveal youth to be more prominent in coverage than was initially anticipated. However, it is important to note that, for the reasons

discussed in the previous sections, this study may not serve as an ideal benchmark for future research aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of how the media portrays the importance of youth in election reporting. Additionally, the lack of data on how youth are represented in media proportionate to other demographics leaves much to be desired on this front. Additional research that includes the measures discussed prior is likely necessary to capture a more accurate metric of youth importance in the context of electoral discourse.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were also both disproven in the course of the analysis, as the associations between youth and incompetence, as well as between youth and apathy, were found to be significantly lower than the 50 percent threshold that was necessary to validate the priors. However, in contrast to the findings related to the portrayal of youth's importance in election reporting, the data pertaining to these negative associations between youth and incompetence and apathy are likely to be an accurate reflection of prevailing trends in media representation. This suggests that, while the study did not substantiate the assumption that these trends would be dominant in the media coverage of youth participation in elections, the observed negative portrayals may indeed align with broader patterns in media discourse.

Despite these associations not appearing in a majority of articles, they were still notable within the sample, with 22.6% of articles making at least one youth-apathy association and 14.5% making a youth-incompetence association. These numbers suggest that negative associations of these types are far from uncommon in media portrayals of young people in elections, even if they do not solely define how youth are portrayed. This lends credence to the proposition that newspaper coverage plays a part in perpetuating the perception of youth as an inactive and unreliable demographic to their audiences.

Additionally, a trend well-established in the data was the relative commonality of associations with apathy compared to associations with incompetence. Apathy associations also frequently appeared multiple times within the same article, a phenomenon which was never observed for incompetence associations. These trends might result from a perception that apathy is a more acceptable label to attach to the youth demographic, whereas incompetence is more provocative. This could explain one trend common in articles associating youth with incompetence: doing so through a quote or attributed comment was seen in multiple articles in the sample. Further examination of such comparative trends between negative associations could offer valuable insights into what specific negative stereotypes of youth are most prevalent in election reporting and how these stereotypes contribute to youth portrayals in the overall media landscape.

Lastly, Hypothesis 4, which proposed that the presence of a strategic-game frame would be linked to a stronger emphasis on youth in election reporting, received some tentative support. Frequently, youth-focused articles would evaluate policy positions based on their strategic value to specific candidates, with one example being the aforementioned TikTok ban: many articles covering the issue associated candidates' positions on the issue with their campaign strategy considerations. Overall, there was a noticeable increase (around nine percent) in the occurrence of strategic-game frames in articles that were youth-focused. However, upon statistical analysis, this observed trend was found to be not statistically significant given the sample size of this study. This result suggests that while there may be a potential connection, the evidence collected is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions. Further research with a larger sample size or different methodologies is necessary to fully validate this hypothesis.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study provides valuable insights both into how newspaper media portrays young voters and how future research in this field of study might be conducted. First, I provide a benchmark understanding of how youth are associated with apathy and with incompetence. While these associations were not prevalent at the levels speculated before examining the data, these associations were nonetheless present, with apathy associations being more common. I also reconsidered the research design and concluded that a multi-stage coding process is proper for this course of study given its capability to identify more trends of note and provide insight into associations that were not preliminarily identified. The commonality of apathy associations in particular is a trend that warrants further research, which may be valuable in uncovering if the media plays a role in perpetuating stereotypes of young peoples' civic engagement patterns. While not as dominant as theorized, negative associations were nonetheless common in the sample and may still play a role in perpetuating the status quo of low youth turnout.

I also provided recommendations for more accurate measurements of importance-related portrayals, as I felt my research design fell short in that regard. For reasons addressed in the discussion section, one major limitation of this study is its inability to provide a benchmark understanding of what level of importance newspaper organizations assign the youth vote. For this reason, I provide recommendations for researchers who seek a more concrete answer to this key part of the picture of youth in election coverage. My recommendations involve performing a broader analysis of election coverage (not focusing solely on the subset of articles with youth mentions) and incorporating comparative elements that place youth among other demographics which commonly appear in the sample.

My research also showed a trend in associations between youth and strategy-game framing that, while not statistically significant at the sample size of this study, proves worth

investigating on a larger scale. If this finding is indicative of an association between youth reporting in election coverage and use of strategy-game frames, this poses interesting questions regarding the effects of such a phenomenon. Further study on this issue might also consider evaluating whether the presence of strategy-game frames in coverage of the youth demographic creates an interest-suppressing effect in a youth audience as was theorized in this study.

## **Appendix: Coding Handbook**

The following are the guidelines used to perform the content analysis for this study. Exceptions to these rules may occur but must always be accompanied by an explanation in the notes of the coding document.

### **Identifying Relevant Articles**

An initial review of the search performed to create this sample identified that many articles included were not relevant to my research question. As such, the following is a guideline for determining which articles are appropriate to include in the sample. Articles included in the sample must:

- Pertain to the United States 2024 election cycle.
- Mention youth voters or young people’s voting decisions at least once in its text.
- Not be a duplicate of another article in the sample.

### **Youth-focused Articles vs Youth Mentions**

For various reasons, articles focused specifically on youth voting need to be distinguished from articles where youth voting is mentioned. A youth-focused article is to be identified through its mentioning of youth or other youth-focused keywords in the title (or byline, if present) of the article. The list of youth-focused keywords used for this classification is provided below:

Youth, Young, Younger, Gen Z, Millennial, Student, College, Campus, Teenager

### **Hypothesis One: Importance**

“Importance” is a measure of how the relevance of youth voter participation is portrayed to the audience. While undertaking this content analysis, I will identify three metrics of importance.

#### ***Importance: Explicit Mentions***

This evaluates whether an article uses language that explicitly marks youth as an important demographic in an electoral context. The following are examples of what constitutes such a mention.

- Using words such as “key,” “essential,” “important,” or synonyms of the above to describe the youth demographic in a general context, e.g., describing youth as “a key coalition of voters.”
- Attributing election results to the impacts made by young voters, e.g., “Younger voters played an important role in the success of Democrats in the most contested races.”

### ***Importance: Page Placement***

Articles in the data set retrieved from physical newspapers will detail where the article appears in the paper. The page placement of an article is a reliable method of determining how important it is deemed to be by editorial staff.

Because this metric measures the importance of the entire article, page placement will only be a relevant metric of importance when relating to youth-focused articles.

### ***Importance: Youth Mention***

This metric judges how far down in the article the mention appears, and is numbered based on paragraphs. For example, an article that does not mention youth voters until paragraph 9 will receive an “Importance: Youth Mention” score of 9. Importantly, when counting this score, “title” lines will not be counted, nor will subheadings that preempt the first true paragraph of the article. This is because only some newspapers and types of articles will use these lines, potentially skewing the data.

### ***Evaluating Importance***

Articles considered to portray youth as a “low-importance demographic” must meet all the following criteria:

- If categorized in print and youth-focused, the article must not be on the front page of the section it was printed on.
- If not youth-focused, the article must have its first mention of youth appear more than halfway through the article.
- The article must contain no explicit mentions of the importance of the youth demographic in voting.

### **Hypothesis Two: Associations with Incompetence**

This metric aims to count how many times within an article youth voters are associated with incompetence. As such, the score for each article increases by 1 for each association identified within the text. The following are examples of such associations, attached to justifications for coding them as associations with incompetence:

Type of language	Example	Justification
Disparaging the capabilities of youth voters.	“He says ‘older people make better decisions; you know what decisions not to make.’”	This is the most direct form of portraying youth as incompetent.
Associating youth voters with pop culture / “meme” culture.	“The Harris campaign has made a concerted effort to piggyback on the vice president's becoming the Gen Z meme sensation of the month.”	This portrays youth as immature and not focused on substance in politics.

### **Hypothesis Three: Associations with Apathy**

This metric aims to count how many times within an article youth voters are associated with apathy. As such, the score for each article increases by 1 for each association identified within

the text. The following are examples of such associations, attached to justifications for coding them as associations with apathy:

Type of language	Example	Justification
Directly stating that youth are apathetic.	“Young voters feel a new antipathy.”	This is the most direct form of portraying youth as apathetic.
Attributing low youth turnout to individual choices.	“Low participation reflects a choice of priorities by those young people.”	This portrays youth as deprioritizing political action.
Mentioning low youth turnout without attributing a potential cause.	“[Youth turnout] here has historically been low, even in presidential elections.”	Emphasizing that youth are “no-shows” without explanation prompts the audience to fall back on prior assumptions.

### **Strategic Frame Presence**

Detecting the presence of a strategic frame in election reporting requires us to identify when strategy is not only present in discussions surrounding elections but emphasized as a key part of the article. Firstly, the presence of strategy reporting can be indicated by any of the following:

- Candidates’ strategic decisions are directly mentioned as the subject of reporting.
- Candidates’ decisions on the campaign trail are associated with “branding” or “attracting voters” rather than reflections of their values/beliefs.
- Candidates’ policy positions are evaluated by their potential for earning votes rather than their ability to address problems.
- Focus is placed on being “ahead” or “behind” in the polls, as well as what measures candidates are taking to “catch up” to their opponent(s)

As stated prior, presence of these trends in election reporting is not sufficient to establish that the article uses strategic framing—rather, these characteristics must be highlighted as especially salient to the reader. This is most obvious when they are placed at the beginning of the article,

the section that readers are most likely to read, and that which contains the most general idea of the piece as a whole. Strategic information at the beginning of an article is also likely to create a priming effect, prompting readers to understand the article through a strategic frame. Therefore, one or more of the above indicators not only must be identified in the article but emphasized—either through their placing, their repetition, or another feature noted on the coding document—to qualify the article’s framing as strategic.

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