

## *Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America*

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### **Understanding the Role of Generation Z in Intergenerational Social Equity**

Right before the first members of Generation Z were born (and three years before my birth year), H. George Frederickson (1994) considered the philosophical, moral, and practical obligations public officials hold to future generations. Across centuries of philosophers, it is understood that current generations have an ethical and pragmatic responsibility to the generation of their immediate successors (their children and grandchildren), as well as the grander posterity of future generations (those who will be here centuries after we no longer are here). With this, Frederickson argues that public officials and administrators have a distinct moral responsibility to address intergenerational social equity for future generations, including issues of private market failure and environmental protection (1994). In the 28 years since Frederickson penned this piece, the oldest members of Generation Z have grown into young adults frustrated, disheartened, afraid, and angry that this moral responsibility has not been upheld.

In his book, *Fight: How Gen Z Is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America*, John Della Volpe posits that Generation Z (also referred to as Gen Z and Zoomers) is uniquely positioned to be the generation in the United States that brings forth the progressive structural changes required for intergenerational social equity that other generations before them have failed to do. Della Volpe serves as the Director of Polling at the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics and has spent decades of his career interviewing young people about their perspectives on contemporary politics and issues. Across the book's 10 chapters, Della Volpe or-

ganizes this argument into two distinct sections. In the first section of the book, he outlines the specific characteristics and attributes that define Generation Z and the specific issues that they are passionate about that have been shaped by their collective experiences, including socioeconomic inequality, gun violence, systemic racism, and climate change. In the latter chapters of the book, Della Volpe contends that Generation Z has taken their collective fears, anger, and concerns around these issues to the voting booth in a way in which previous generations have not.

While age is often used as a characteristic to highlight differences in polling results and public opinion, the use of generations offers further insight and understanding of *why* certain trends occur. In his book, Della Volpe argues that unlike other demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, regional location, socioeconomic status, and others, generations are unique because they are defined by a collection of historical events that shape collective experiences. Central to Della Volpe's argument, these historical events that occur during generations' formative years broadly shape the values, attitudes, and beliefs of youth that they carry into adulthood.

Generation Z has come of age in a tumultuous time. The September 11th terrorist attacks and subsequent War on Terror began as the oldest members of Generation Z began their elementary school education. The destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 2008 financial and housing crises left Generation Z with a lingering feeling of instability before entering their teenage years. Contemporary issues including the opioid epidemic, rise of mass shootings, prevalence of climate change, violence of racial injustice, the Trump administration, and the COVID-19 pandemic have left

a heaviness for Generation Z to contend with as they enter adulthood. However, as Della Volpe observes, rather than being grappled by fear and depression for the future, Generation Z has become invigorated to act.

Through extensive polling data, quotes from focus groups and interviews with members of Generation Z, as well as vignettes of Generation Z activists like David Hogg (also featured as the author of the book's foreword), Emma González (known as X González), Darnella Frazier, and Greta Thunberg, Della Volpe uses a broad collection of quantitative and qualitative data to base his conclusions.

### Chapter Highlights

Chapter 1, "United by Fear" offers readers insight into how members of Generation Z have made sense of the world they live and were raised in. Della Volpe provides a brief overview of the historical events that have shaped each existing generation including Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials before turning the body of the chapter's attention to Generation Z. Generation Z, he argues, has grown up in a tumultuous time with a continuous series of punctuations of social, political, and economic strife. Consequently, Generation Z reports notable mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and suicidality unforeseen compared to older generations, in part, due to the work Generation Z has done in reducing mental health stigmas. Furthermore, the political turbulence stirred by the Trump administration has ignited greater sentiments of divisiveness, anger, and fear. However, as the book title and Della Volpe suggest, fear is what unites Generation Z's motivation toward action.

In the following chapters, Della Volpe provides an examination of what he proposes are the five landmark events that shape the personal experiences and political values of Generation Z: 1) the Occupy movement, 2) the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, 3) the murder of George Floyd, 4) Greta Thunberg's School Strike for Climate, and 5) the Trump presidency. Chapter 2, "Just a Student," examines issues of economic inequality highlighted by the Occupy movement and experienced by Generation Z during the 2008 Recession and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Six Minutes in Parkland" is the evocative title of Della Volpe's third chapter, which examines how the event of mass gun violence at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School has impacted both the student activists that emerged from the event and the actions of members of Generation Z

who witnessed the perceived apathy from government actors and corporations who refused to take their concerns seriously. Della Volpe points to the high youth voter turnout during the 2018 midterm election as a reflection that if public actors will not take Generation Z's concerns seriously while in office, they will have to at the voting booth. Chapter 4, "Right in Front of Everybody," provides an intimate perspective of the experience of Darnella Frazier, the then-17-year-old who recorded the infamous video of George Floyd's murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police. Looking more broadly at the feelings of Black Generation Z youth, Della Volpe emphasizes Generation Z's empathy and resolve to understand and address racism in American institutions. As he most saliently states, "Generation Z knows that police brutality and institutional racism existed well before the day of George Floyd's murder. His death is what sparked the protests. What gave the protests oxygen, though, was what Darnella's video represented . . . for large swaths of good and decent people, the government was not upholding its end of our social contract" (95).

In a shift from the largely optimistic perspective Della Volpe provides to the passions of Generation Z, Chapter 5 titled "Backlash" gives attention to an increasingly worrisome issue reminding readers that youth experiences of isolation, in part exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent radicalization through social media, leave other members of this generation vulnerable to hate groups, neo-Nazis, and the rise of the alt-right. Chapter 6, "Tip of the Spear," looks back at Millennials as the "prototype" generation before Generation Z based on the largely shared values of each generation. Della Volpe also provides an overview of Millennials' efforts in civic engagement and key differences between how the Obama and Clinton campaigns engaged the youth vote during the 2008 presidential primary campaign. In Chapter 7, "Impatience is a Virtue"—a sharp demarcation from the common phrase "patience is a virtue"—Della Volpe reminds readers that the current pressures around the issues Generation Z cares about (e.g., climate change, education, political transparency, and accountability, police brutality) cannot be placed on the back burner.

Shifting to more contemporary political campaigns, Chapter 8, "Ask and Ye Shall Receive," looks at the 2020 presidential primary race. When evaluating voter engagement strategies, Della Volpe argues that it is not a mystery that Senator Bernie Sanders was an appealing presidential candidate to youth voters. Senator Sanders engaged

youth voters in a way his contemporaries did not, because he took youth concerns seriously. Consequently, Senator Sanders received the majority of the youth vote during the primary election compared to President Joe Biden, who ultimately won the Democratic Party nomination. The lesson Della Volpe hopes to impart is that if political candidates take youth seriously, they will receive the youth vote. In Chapter 9, “I Hear You,” Della Volpe recounts his experience working with the Biden 2020 presidential campaign. Della Volpe attributes a portion of President Biden’s success in the presidential race to his success in cultivating and courting a large portion of the Millennial and Generation Z (youth) voters. Della Volpe’s final chapter, “To the Future,” takes a crystal ball look into pondering what the future will look like as Generation Z grows older and becomes leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors by providing 10 predictions of the world ahead. As Della Volpe posits, “the main questions remaining, therefore, are: How will Generation Z put its energy, spirit, and moral code to use? And what will America look like in three decades from now as Zoomers raise their own families, invent new industries, lead governments, and take the helm of our nation’s public and private institutions?” (187). To change the identity of American life, Della Volpe argues that we as a collective need to lean into and appeal to Generation Z’s moral identity and values.

Drawing from the stories and voices of Generation Z youth, Della Volpe succeeds in capturing the spirit of this generation. However, Della Volpe takes on a herculean task of generalizing a generation that at some points can fail to acknowledge the nuanced perspectives of the individuals who compose Generation Z. While the overall tone of the book is hopeful in highlighting the achievements of a progressive young generation coming into their own, there are some harsh realities about the mental health, political turmoil, and pessimism toward existing institutions.

### Concluding Thoughts: How *Fight* Can Advance Social Equity

*Fight* reads like a love letter from an older generation to a younger one. Della Volpe’s admiration for the passion

of Generation Z is clear in each chapter as he praises individuals and communities of youth using their voices to bring to light the failure of older generations to uphold their responsibility for those in the future. For older generations who may view Generation Z as “overly sensitive, lazy, and entitled,” as stated on the inner sleeve cover, *Fight* may help audiences reconsider the values and passion of Generation Z as an innate response to the collective experiences that have shaped Generation Z into the teenagers and young adults they see today. As Frederickson (1994) highlighted the responsibility of intergenerational social equity public officials hold for future generations, Della Volpe demonstrates how this remains a core value of Generation Z. However, the ethical responsibilities of intergenerational social equity should not be lost on older generations who still hold considerable wealth and power in the United States.

In considering the weight of intergenerational social equity that Generation Z seeks, it is an impossibly heavy burden to place on the shoulders of a young generation with the work required to achieve such a feat only possible through the cooperation of older generations alongside Generation Z. It is for these reasons that the political power of the youth vote has continued to rise in prevalence and importance over the past several election cycles. As the 2024 presidential election approaches, the power of Generation Z voters will continue to play an important role in shaping the democratic future of the United States. In painting a picture of Generation Z as passionate youth already working to better their future and address inequity, *Fight* showcases the passions of the next generation of leaders and public administrators.

### Reference

- Frederickson, H. G. (1994). “Can Public Officials Correctly Be Said to Have Obligations to Future Generations?” *Public Administration Review* 54 (5), 457–464. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/976431>

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