

## Re-Imagining Political Leadership: Sine Institute Survey Shows What Young Americans Look for in Leaders

**WASHINGTON, D.C. (September 17, 2024)** — Young people look to the motivations and leadership styles of candidates for public office, not just their positions on issues, according to a new, innovative survey of young adults by the Sine Institute of Policy and Politics at American University. The survey of 1,214 young Americans ages 18-34 examined the attributes they look for in leaders and assessed how the presidential candidates measure up, among other topics related to voting and other forms of civic engagement.

The study employed innovative methodologies, including testing messages that were focused on different leadership traits and that were delivered via audio clips with an AI-generated voice. Those results and other survey responses pointed to a combination of four winning leadership traits.

“This research offers a model for leaders looking to inspire, engage, and win the trust of young Americans,” **said Amy Dacey**, executive director of the Sine Institute for Policy and Politics at American University. “They are looking for leaders with a combination of integrity, authenticity, inclusivity, and compassion. You need to be honest, be real, value everyone, and show that you care.”

“We saw a large gap between the aspirations that young adults have for political leaders and their perceptions of political leadership in America today,” **said Molly O’Rourke**, Sine Institute Senior Advisor and executive-in-residence in the American University School of Communication. “Younger adults are looking for specific leadership attributes and this research provides insights and ideas for engaging them in ways that can help win their trust.”

The survey was designed by the Sine Institute in partnership with Future Caucus and Close Up Foundation and was based on interviews conducted by Generation Lab, a data intelligence company that gathers and interprets the views and behavior of young adults. An advisory group of 10 AU graduate and undergraduate students from across the university helped to design the poll, formulate its questions, and provide feedback on the survey methodology and results.

### A Winning Combination of Leadership Traits

The most important qualities young people hope to see in political leaders and candidates for elected office speak to their motivations and leadership style, not just their positions on issues. The survey tested eight leadership traits drawn from political science and social psychology research and recommendations from the group of student advisors who helped to shape the survey. The traits are: Authenticity, Compassion, Competence, Compromise, Decisiveness, Idealism, Inclusiveness, and Integrity.

Survey respondents listened to eight short recordings of an AI-generated voice delivering messages related to different leadership traits. More than four in ten respondents considered messages that spoke to “Integrity,” “Authenticity,” “Inclusivity,” and “Compassion” as “very appealing in a leader.”

#### **Integrity**

*“I’m running because we need honest leaders with integrity who will serve others, not themselves. I’ll always do what’s right for the people I’m elected to represent, whether you voted for me or not.”*

#### **Authenticity**

*“I’m running because we need leaders who are willing to tell hard truths and be real with people. I won’t just say what you want to hear. I’ll give you my honest opinion, even if it’s unpopular and if I make a mistake, I’ll own up to it.”*

#### **Inclusivity**

*“I’m running to make sure our government serves everyone equally. Every voice matters. America works best when it works for all, with no one left out or left behind.”*

### **Compassion**

*“I’m running because I care about people. Good leaders are compassionate, active listeners. I want to make people’s lives better by truly understanding your concerns and focusing on what we have in common as human beings.”*

“Decades of research suggest that traits like these are the foundations of trust,” said **Doug Hattaway**, president of Hattaway Communications, who served as an advisor to the Sine team. “They’re not just looking at your resume or policy agenda. They want to know how you’ll show up as a human being. And to win their trust, you need to show up.”

### **Walking the Walk**

Young adults are looking for actions from officeholders and candidates that align with their aspirations. The survey tested a variety of activities that would give young adults a “somewhat” or “very positive” impression of a leader:

- Form a youth advisory council and meet regularly with young people (total positive 72%)
- Participate in community events with constituents (total positive 72%)
- Engage in regular dialogue with someone from the opposite party (total positive 68%)
- Regularly spend a day “shadowing” an “average” person to understand them better (total positive 66%)
- Share a meal regularly with “average” families to understand their lives (total positive 64%)
- Talk about a mistake or something they’ve done that they regret (total positive 64%)
- Talk about adversity or challenges they’ve faced (total positive 62%)

The results of the survey also demonstrate that young Americans were especially pessimistic in their belief that the government is effective (49% percent giving it a “poor” or “failing” grade) or inclusive (33% giving it a “poor” or “failing” grade).

The survey revealed that being “willing to work members of the other party and compromise to get results” (18%), having a “commitment to serving/prioritizing others (not yourself)” (17%), “active listening” (12%), and demonstrating “compassion and empathy”(12%) are the attributes that young people report most missing in today’s political leaders.

### **2024 Presidential Candidates**

About half (49%) of respondents described themselves as very likely or certain to vote in the 2024 presidential election. At the time of the survey, among young Americans who are registered to vote, Kamala Harris had a 31-point lead over Donald Trump (55% to 24%) in the multicandidate trial heat, with Harris scoring higher than Trump on all eight leadership qualities tested, including young Americans’ top priorities – commitment to serving others and active listening.

For more information about the survey and to access an accompanying toolkit and topline, click [here](#).

### **About American University**

*American University leverages the power and purpose of scholarship, learning, and community to impact our changing world. AU’s faculty, students, staff, and alumni are changemakers who shape the future from sustainability to social justice to the sciences. Building on our 128-year history of education and research in the public interest, we say ‘Challenge Accepted’ to addressing the world’s pressing issues.*

*Our Change Can't Wait comprehensive campaign creates transformative educational opportunities, advances research with impact, and builds stronger communities.*

### **About the Sine Institute for Policy & Politics**

*The Sine Institute of Policy & Politics at American University is one of the nation's premier forums for the study and discussion of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century. As an incubator for policy innovation, the Sine Institute is committed to bringing students together with national and global changemakers to search for common ground and cultivate solutions to today's most pressing challenges.*

### **About Future Caucus**

*The Future Caucus is an organization dedicated to renewing American democracy. In collaboration with dozens of Millennial leaders across the country, and with the generous support of visionary philanthropists, the Future Caucus was formed and officially launched in 2013. The Future Caucus works directly with our nation's leading young policymakers on both a national and state level to bridge the partisan divide and lead a new era of collaborative governance. As a national, nonpartisan nonprofit dedicated to activating millennial and Gen Z policymakers, Future Caucus gives our nation's young leaders the resources and support to develop and pass innovative policy solutions — and forge productive partnerships on the issues affecting the youngest generations of Americans.*

### **About Close Up Foundation**

*Founded in 1971, Close Up Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, civic education organization that believes a strong democracy requires active, informed participation by all citizens. Close Up seeks to serve young people from all communities and all backgrounds, regardless of race, religion, gender, socioeconomic level, or academic standing. For over 50 years, we have partnered with schools nationwide to serve more than one million students and educators through experiential programs in our nation's capital and in local communities, virtual programs, professional development, and curriculum and resource design. Close Up Washington DC's issue-centric, nonpartisan curriculum gives participants a deeper understanding of history, government institutions, current issues, and the role of citizens.*

### **About Hattaway Communications**

*Hattaway Communications, Inc., is a strategic communications firm that helps visionary leaders and organizations use the power of strategy, science and storytelling to achieve ambitious goals for people and the planet. The firm conducts innovative communications research to design strategies, content, and campaigns informed by social science and data science. Its clients include universities, foundations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and businesses around the world. Founder Doug Hattaway has worked for political leaders and organizations at the local, state, and national levels, including six Presidential campaigns.*