



## **THE KIDS AREN'T ALL RIGHT: GEN Z POLITICS AS A SEARCH FOR SECURITY**

**Date:** September 18, 2025

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On September 18th, 2025, Mr. Sam David presented *The Kids Aren't All Right: Gen Z Politics as a Search for Security*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The presentation discussed the rightward shift in Gen Z voters transnationally, suggesting that high exposure to ongoing crises contributes to a vulnerable worldview marked by ontological insecurity, pessimism, and disengagement. The presentation connected these insecurity dynamics to broader youth behaviors beyond elections, including trends in youth violence and emerging forms of nihilistic violent extremism defined by mixed ideologies, chaos-seeking, and cognitive overload.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Mr. David explored the shift to the right in Gen Z voters during the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, despite the generation being associated with more progressive values of diversity, tolerance, and social justice. He challenged the focus solely on physical security concerns, arguing that ontological insecurity—disruptions to narratives that provide an individual a sense of continuity and stability—provides an alternative but inclusive explanation for the shift in voting behaviour. He argued that a sense of vulnerability might make an individual more willing to accept risk in their decision-making and that young voters' anxieties over climate change, war, debt, and social instability could potentially move voters towards anti-establishment politics.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Presentation**

Mr. David's presentation focused on understanding the rightward shift of Gen Z voters in the 2024 U.S. Presidential election, situating it within a broader transnational pattern of youth voting in recent years. Historically, Gen Z has been associated with progressive values—prioritizing diversity, social justice, and tolerance at higher rates than previous generations—yet in the 2024 US election, youth voter turnout both declined and shifted right against data from 2020. This shift was not limited demographically, but rather was consistent across race, gender, income, education, and geography, pointing to the need for investigation that extends beyond physical security concerns and identity division.

To analyze this phenomenon, Mr. David introduced the concept of “insecurity framing,” drawing on prospect theory, ontological security theory, and socio-ecological vulnerability. Prospect theory argues that individuals in a perceived “loss frame” are more willing to accept risk in their decisions as a means of improving conditions, while ontological security refers to the individual conception of a coherent sense of self and continuity. Through this lens he argued that compounding crises, such as climate change, COVID-19, cost of living, war, and technological upheaval, may have fractured global narratives of stability, producing heightened vulnerability and a readiness to embrace high-risk political options as a means of gaining security.

Examining both online and offline discourse in Gen Z, Mr. David found a dominance of loss over gain framing and a higher presence of ontological security over physical security concerns. Participants often expressed anxieties surrounding physical security, such as war, climate collapse, and economic precarity, but these were often presented as disrupted institutional narratives and unmet expectations for present and future security. The analysis identified a heavy reliance on memes, satire, and influencer culture that both masked political engagement and signaled apathy. These insights suggest that the Gen Z rightward turn cannot be explained solely by surface-level policy issues but must be understood as part of a deeper search for security amid compounding global disruptions.

Mr. David extended his framework to consider youth violence and extremism, critiquing definitions of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE) and mixed-unclear-unstable (MUU) as too vague, suggesting that a focus on a traditional left-right binary has created confusion in the identification of individuals potentially radicalising in this milieu. He argued that perceptions of vulnerability and pessimism in individuals informs a worldview where ideology is secondary to a

search for narrative security, and that traditional indicators of radicalisation on their own may be insufficient in prevention efforts.

### Question and Answer

*What trends or patterns did you notice that led to you pursuing youth counter radicalization? Are there any specific cases in particular that led to this interest?*

Mr. David explained that the project began after repeated conversations with individuals directly experiencing emerging social and security pressures, where existing narratives felt incomplete and disconnected. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened his awareness of growing despair and diminishing future confidence, which he continued to observe both electorally and in extremism trends. Recognizing a gap for deeper investigation, he sought to better understand these dynamics.

*How do you think that trends such as political nihilism or meme culture could affect the overall voting behavior of Gen Z?*

Mr. David argued that trends like political nihilism and meme culture have consistently been a part of Gen Z's engagement with politics, influencing both how they perceive issues and how they express opinions online. A key factor is the perceived need among youth to choose sides and participate in online discourse, a trend that accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic when much interaction moved online. This dynamic now influences elections and reactions to current events, reflecting an escalation of preexisting behaviors. The speaker highlighted the role of social media platforms like TikTok, through which a significant portion of youth obtain news, as a signal of broader trends rooted in growing institutional distrust. With multiple competing narratives replacing a formerly unified story, youth engagement increasingly reflects a fragmented and complex informational landscape.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- **Rightward Shift Among Gen Z:** Despite historically progressive tendencies, Gen Z voters in the 2024 U.S. election shifted right across demographic groups, highlighting a transnational pattern of youth voting change.

- **Insecurity Framing Drives Behavior:** Mr. David emphasized ontological insecurity—disruptions to narratives that provide stability and continuity—as a key factor shaping risk-accepting political choices, beyond traditional physical security concerns.
- **Compounding Crises Influence Vulnerability:** Exposure to crises like climate change, COVID-19, economic instability, and war has heightened Gen Z’s sense of vulnerability, fostering pessimism, disengagement, and nihilistic tendencies.
- **Meme Culture and Online Discourse:** Memes, satire, and influencer culture both mask political engagement and signal apathy, shaping how youth perceive and express political opinions, particularly through platforms like TikTok.
- **Implications Beyond Elections:** The same insecurity dynamics informing voting behavior are reflected in trends in youth violence and emerging forms of nihilistic violent extremism, where ideology is secondary to a search for narrative security.

#### FURTHER READING

David, S. (2025). *The kids aren't all right: Investigating ontological (in)security frames in Gen Z political behaviour surrounding the 2024 US presidential election* (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia). University of British Columbia. <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0449888>

David, S. (2024). Comfort and chaos: The neuro-ontological dilemma in cyber-information sharing. In G. Adlakha-Hutcheon & G. Adlakha-Hutcheon (Eds.), *In(security): Identifying the invisible disruptors of security* (pp. 67–91). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67608-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67608-6_4)

Kelshall, C. M., David, S., & Harron, M. (2024). Security and the human infrastructure. In G. Adlakha-Hutcheon & C. M. Kelshall (Eds.), *In(security): Identifying the invisible disruptors of security*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67608-6\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67608-6_5)