

National Climate & Environment Education Health Innovations Investigations Nation

Gen Z is influencing the abortion debate – from TikTok



Left: Abortion rights activist Olivia Julianna. Right: Antiabortion activist Savannah Craven. (Callaghan O'Hare, Madeline Gray for The Washington Post)

By Janay Kingsberry

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Young people have never known life without *Roe v. Wade*.

Until now.

After the Supreme Court on Friday [overturned](#) the landmark ruling that protected the right to an abortion, many of them have a lot to say about it.

Defined as those born after 1996, members of Generation Z have lived through unprecedented events — including the Sept. 11 attacks and the coronavirus pandemic. In recent years, issues such as climate change, gun control and racial justice have mobilized them as young voters. And social media is playing a central role: They are launching coordinated action from their phones.

Now they've turned their focus to abortion as states regain the power to determine its legality. (So far, roughly [half of them](#) are poised to ban or drastically restrict access.)

[Abortion is now banned in these states. Others will follow.]

To understand how younger Americans are engaging in this issue, The Washington Post explored how two influencers on opposing ends of the debate — Olivia Julianna and Savannah Craven — have risen as youth activists on TikTok, where Gen Z makes up more than [60 percent](#) of users.

Their stories show how Gen Z is harnessing political power: by creating bite-size videos on the nation's fastest-growing social media platform.

The catalysts for action

OLIVIA JULIANNA

Last fall, Olivia Julianna needed a ride to Austin. Though it was only a three-hour drive from her small hometown in Southeast Texas, the 19-year-old had no car, no license and no family willing or able to take her, she said.

But she had friends.

One offered to drive her there and back. Another flew from California to be by her side during what Olivia calls one of the most significant events of her life — the 2021 Austin Women's March, where she would address more than 35,000 people from the steps of the Texas Capitol.

- **Julianne delivers speech at Austin Women's March**

Moments before Olivia was set to take the stage that October day, she wandered aimlessly through the crowds.

“I was extremely nervous, like borderline-panic-attack nervous,” said Olivia, who uses her first name and middle name publicly and was granted partial anonymity because of privacy concerns.

But once she reached the lectern and gazed out over the crowd, the nerves fell away: “I’ve never felt so calm in my life,” she said.

From the stage, Olivia delivered a searing address directed at Gov. Greg Abbott (R) and S.B. 8, which at that point was the nation’s most restrictive abortion law. It had gone into effect a month before the protest, triggering a wave of copycat legislation across Republican-led states.

“How can you be pro-life but force a rape victim to have a rapist’s baby?” Olivia said to the crowd. “How can you be pro-life and force a young girl to become a mother before she can get her driver’s license?”

[This Texas teen wanted an abortion. She now has twins.]

Stepping off the stage minutes later, Olivia felt exhilarated, she said. It was her first time attending an in-person political event; her first time giving a public address; and the first time her purpose felt crystal clear.

Before that moment, Olivia had been questioning her recent advocacy: [the anti-Trump TikTok videos](#) she began making in secret a year earlier, the rifts her liberal views created with members of her conservative religious family.

“It’s cost me so many people in my life to do this,” Olivia said. But “that moment solidified that I knew I was doing the right thing.”

Last year, as Olivia began focusing more on abortion rights advocacy, a young

activist on the other end of the Bible Belt region began finding her voice in the antiabortion movement.

SAVANNAH CRAVEN

For Savannah Craven, 20, the calling sparked years earlier in her high school math class in Myrtle Beach, S.C. It was the spring of 2019, and Savannah had formed a friendship with the girl who sat beside her.

One day, Savannah said, her classmate showed her a photo of a positive pregnancy test on her phone.

“I had never known anyone personally or had a friend that had become pregnant young or in school,” Savannah said. “I just looked at her and I was like, ‘Well, what are you going to do?’”

The classmate said she planned to have an abortion. And she nearly did.

She had scheduled an appointment at the nearest abortion facility — about two hours away. But on the morning of the procedure, Savannah said, her friend woke up to a flat tire.

She immediately called Savannah, the only person in her life who hadn’t pressured her to terminate the pregnancy, according to Savannah. “She was like, ‘You have no idea. I’ve been praying for a sign,’” Savannah recalled.

“I just knew she was meant to have this baby,” Savannah continued. “We’re not promised an easy life. ... But women are stronger than their circumstances.”

That’s a message Savannah realized she wanted to spread.

Today, she is a prominent voice advocating for abortion restrictions to her more than 113,000 followers on [TikTok](#). She has also joined forces with some of the largest antiabortion groups in the country to lead national marches, counterprotests and door-knocking campaigns.

- **Craven talks to abortion rights supporters**

While Savannah and Olivia both grew up in conservative religious households in the South, their views on abortion have largely been shaped by their respective identities and the communities they represent. Experts say consideration of such personal implications is a driving force behind youth activism.

“For Gen Z, identity is front and center. And I think that matters a lot for a topic like the abortion debate, because abortion is such a personal topic,” said Ioana Literat, an associate professor at Teachers College at Columbia University whose [research](#) examines youth political expression on social media. “So TikTok, I think, is such a fitting space for those discussions because political expression on TikTok is quintessentially personal.”

Indeed, social metrics indicate the topic has expansive reach on the platform: Following the Supreme Court’s ruling on Friday, the hashtags [#roevwade](#), [#womensrights](#) and [#abortion](#) began [trending](#) on the app. To date, [#prochoice](#) has earned more than 4 billion video views. [#Prolife](#) has 2.3 billion. And dozens of other related tags, ranging from [#abortionawareness](#) to [#antiabortion](#), have racked up anywhere from hundreds of thousands to millions of total views — numbers that will only continue to climb in a post-*Roe* era.

The impact of influence

OLIVIA JULIANNA

Before the march in Austin, Olivia's activism wasn't focused on a singular issue.

Rather, it was spurred by the political divisiveness of the 2020 election, in which roughly 24 million eligible voters — or 10 percent of the electorate — were members of Gen Z.

It was Olivia's junior year of high school, and she was "isolated at home," she said: "I was on my phone watching footage from Black Lives Matter protests, watching Trump go on TV and just be outrageous, hateful and bigoted."

A minor and immunocompromised, Olivia couldn't attend any protests that summer. Plus, she said, "my parents did not agree with my political views, so I was not allowed to go."

Instead, she downloaded TikTok and started using the platform to talk about politics. Her earliest videos posted in July 2020 explained third-party voting, potential outcomes of the election and more.

Within a month, she had amassed more than 10,000 followers and hundreds of thousands of views, gaining the attention of a fast-growing, progressive, youth-led organization then known as "TikTok for Biden," she said.

Throughout the election cycle, the coalition regularly leveraged her content on their platforms, and Olivia watched her account grow quickly. By January 2021, she had more than 77,000 followers. Shortly after President Biden's inauguration, "TikTok for Biden" became Gen-Z for Change, a nonprofit that continues to tap influencers for a broad range of political and social issues.

Today, the organization has a membership of more than 500 creators with a combined following of about 540 million people. As Politico first noted, that figure far exceeds the combined 5 million average monthly viewerships of Fox News, CNN and MSNBC combined.

“We are not afraid to do things that other organizations probably wouldn’t do,” 18-year-old founder and executive director Aidan Kohn-Murphy said. “We’re young, we’re scrappy … we’re disrupters.”

Olivia, who works as a political-strategy coordinator for Gen-Z for Change, spearheads some of the group’s boldest initiatives. As a queer Mexican woman, she feels this advocacy is her duty.

“I know what it’s like to feel left out of certain conversations,” she said. “And if I’m not using my platform to try to make sure that’s not happening to other people, then I’m doing a disservice to the people who are in this conversation with me.”

- **Julianna calls out abortion whistleblower site**

Last August, in her most high-profile campaign to date, Olivia led an effort to spam the antiabortion group [Texas Right to Life's](#) abortion-whistleblower site, where anonymous users could report suspected violations of S.B. 8. (The law's enforcement mechanism allows [any private individual](#) to sue anyone who helps facilitate an abortion.)

Activists said they believe their efforts — flooding the site with false reports — crashed the tip line days after the law went into effect on Sept. 1. At the time, Texas Right to Life disputed this claim and said it was searching for a new hosting platform after being [dropped by GoDaddy](#).

Now based in Houston with a TikTok following of [more than 215,000 users](#), Olivia is thinking about a future in politics. She attends college online and will be starting a political science program in the fall.

SAVANNAH CRAVEN

The 2020 election year also laid the groundwork for Savannah's advocacy efforts.

Amid a national reckoning on race, Savannah said, she started learning about the higher rates in which Black people seek abortions in the United States.

"I just think that because there's an entire organization dedicated to supposedly helping Black people, they should be worried about the most vulnerable Black people and preborn Black people," she said, referencing the Black Lives Matter movement.

According to [data](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of abortion patients in 2019 were Black women. Their rate of abortions was more than three times that of White women, the CDC reports. Those figures did not include California, Maryland and New Hampshire.

Reproductive rights advocates say the rates are driven by systemic inequities.

“Geographic and financial access to reproductive health services, including contraceptives, could be a factor behind higher unintended pregnancy and abortion rates, which in turn reflect pervasive racial health disparities that stem from structural racism,” said Liza Fuentes, principal research scientist at Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit research firm that supports abortion rights.

[[Women of color will be most impacted by the end of Roe, experts say](#)]

Since joining TikTok last year, Savannah’s account has seen rapid growth, she said. In her first few videos, which she started posting in March 2021, she criticized the Biden administration, slamming mask and vaccination mandates.

“Then basically I just started getting more into the pro-life stuff, and people really started to like it,” Savannah said. “And where my account really blew up was when I started doing these live streams debating pro-abortion people.”

Those streams, she said, have generated hundreds of comments — both in support of and against her views. “I’ve heard everything under the sun when it comes to the abortion argument,” Savannah said, “and it’s great for me because I want to know what people’s concerns are.”

TikTok has long been perceived as a vehicle for liberal expression, said Columbia University’s Literat, largely “because it’s been talked about ... in the context of anti-Trump and pro-Democratic activism.”

But conservative users such as Savannah signal that there is vibrant expression on both sides of the political divide, Literat added.

Live Action is among the antiabortion groups that have gleaned this insight. With more than 500,000 followers and 16 million likes on its TikTok page, it ranks as one of the Top 3 creators of [#prolife](#) content uploaded to the app.

As an independent contractor for Live Action, Savannah's videos are regularly shared to the group's page, she said: "I've been really, really grateful for that [partnership], and that has just blossomed into other amazing opportunities."

That has included hosting man-on-the-street videos and counterprotesting at marches such as the Bans Off Our Bodies rally in Raleigh, N.C., last month. Savannah has also participated in events with Students For Life, one of the country's largest antiabortion organizations.

"We are the ground game of the pro-life movement," said Kristan Hawkins, Students for Life of America's founder and president. She added that the group relies heavily on connecting with Gen Zers and millennials: "Everything we do is about reaching young people where they are and getting them activated."

- **Craven produces original MAGA rap: 'Be Like Candace'**

Savannah, who has a background in musical theater, has initiatives of her own, including writing and performing conservative rap songs. Last year, her music video “[Be Like Candace](#)” caught the attention of right-wing commentator Candace Owens. Soon after, Savannah said, she was invited to be part of the organization Owens co-founded, [the Blexit Foundation](#), which states a vision “to change the narrative that surrounds America’s minority communities.”

Savannah said there are a lot of things people get wrong about antiabortion activists. Among them, she said, is the stereotype that they can be aggressive and violent.

“I don’t stand outside Planned Parenthood yelling at women saying they’re terrible people. I’m just out there to offer them a different option,” she said.

[*Candace Owens Is the New Face of Black Conservatism*](#)

Amid tensions over *Roe*, the country is warning of [a potential surge in attacks](#), citing social media posts by both those for and against abortion that have targeted justices and their clerks, places of worship, and abortion facilities.

With their outsize presence online, Savannah and Olivia say they also fall prey to such threats.

The potential pitfalls of a platform

OLIVIA JULIANNA

Online abuse and harassment have long plagued social media sites — especially for young adult users, according to a [2021 Pew study](#).

In 2018, TikTok users [spoke out](#) about being bullied on the platform, saying the company wasn't doing enough to protect them. Since then, TikTok has introduced new tools — including [comment filters](#) and a [mass-blocking feature](#) — to try to foster a safe environment for creators.

Olivia said she has experienced harassment firsthand on the app: "I've gotten multiple death threats. I've had people threaten to sexually assault me. I've had people threatening to kill my family."

But the most frequent attacks she receives are comments about her body, she said.

"It really does take a toll on how you perceive yourself as a person, especially if you're someone who's already struggling with body image," said Olivia, adding that she has struggled with eating disorders throughout her life.

SAVANNAH CRAVEN

In several instances, Savannah has seen some of her own content blocked or

taken down, saying the posts are typically flagged as hate speech. “But I don’t think that anything I’ve ever said is something that should be removed or as crazy as hate speech,” she said.

One recent post that was flagged was a “duet” of Savannah [reacting to a video](#) that another user made about her. It was eventually reinstated after Savannah filed an appeal on the app, she said.

In an earlier instance, Savannah was [banned](#) from TikTok in April for multiple violations of its community guidelines, but “they restored my account because I was able to appeal it,” she said.

“Our goal is to foster a safe environment for people to create, share, and connect on topics that matter to them,” a TikTok spokesperson told The Post. “We remove abusive or harassing behavior and empower people with tools to block and report accounts and control who can engage with their content.”

A future in flux

With *Roe* overturned, Savannah and Olivia say their work is just beginning.

Earlier this month, Olivia participated in a [roundtable meeting](#) at the White House with young leaders on reproductive justice. Now she’s gearing up for a summer of organizing.

Olivia Julianna poses for a portrait in Houston in June. (Callaghan O'Hare for The Washington Post)



Savannah Craven holds her 1972 necklace, which marks the year before Roe v. Wade was decided, in Myrtle Beach. (Madeline Gray for The Washington Post)

Moments after the Supreme Court decision came down last week, the Gen-Z for Change leadership team hopped on a Zoom call to discuss the next course of action. “Our plan for now remains the same — use our platform to provide information and resources concerning reproductive health care and abortion, and encourage civic engagement in November,” Olivia said. “A big part of this will be uplifting abortion funds and organizations that have been doing the work for the last several decades.”

Savannah and other antiabortion advocates, meanwhile, have been celebrating the ruling. When the decision was announced, she was on the grounds of the Supreme Court with Students for Life.

“I just burst into tears,” she said. “I’m just so grateful that I was able to be there for such a monumental moment. Like, no matter your side, this is definitely a pivotal moment in history.”

[Photos: The scene outside the Supreme Court after Roe v. Wade was overturned]

But Savannah, too, emphasizes that there is a long fight ahead for her.

“What this means to me as a pro-life activist, as a post-*Roe* activist, is that now we are going to be going state by state to demand that every human life is deserving of the right to life,” she said. “That’s what we’re going to be fighting for in our state legislatures.”

Researchers are speculating how the Supreme Court’s ruling could influence the midterms, which have historically seen lower turnout than general elections.

Especially after a record for youth turnout in the 2020 presidential election, the fight over abortion this year “has the potential to really, really bring young people out to a great degree,” said Abby Kiesa, deputy director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University.

And both Savannah and Olivia’s efforts highlight a trend experts have noted in mobilizing young voters, Kiesa added: “A lot of that work has been done by young women, and a lot of that work done by young women of color.”

That kind of impact still shocks Olivia, who said she has moments like in Austin, where she’s trying to take it all in.

“It doesn’t really hit me sometimes that I have the platform to speak and I’m doing these things,” she said. “I literally just see myself as a kid who cares about politics.”

And Savannah feels reminded of her purpose every time she's with her godson — the child her high school friend decided to carry to term.

Ever since she herself was a kid, Savannah said, she has wanted to make a difference in people's lives: "I feel even though I'm just one person, I am doing that."

About this story

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