

A leadership wake-up call

What Gen Z's preferences mean for democracy worldwide

- Gen Z is supposedly globally aware, with progressive ideals and concepts of leadership.
- Research by Dr Arthur Pantelides of Virginia Wesleyan University, USA, suggests otherwise.
- Eastern Europe and Central Asia students exhibit an affinity for authoritarian political leadership.
- But these preferences differ when considering the workplace.
- How they reconcile two seemingly incompatible ideas has global implication.

When we think of Generation Z – those born after 1995 – we tend to picture a hyper-connected, globally aware demographic with progressive ideals. Considered digital natives, they are portrayed as champions of equality, inclusivity, and participation. This comforting image aligns with the values of Western-style democracies. However, on closer scrutiny, this generation may not be the defenders of democracy we assume they are.

This unsettling possibility emerges from a study by Dr Arthur Pantelides, an international business leadership and management scholar at Virginia Wesleyan University in the US. Pantelides examined the leadership preferences of Gen Z individuals from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Central Asia. It's not unusual for studies of this nature to focus on generational traits. This research stands apart for its focus on how Gen Z reconciles two seemingly incompatible ideas: authoritarian

leadership in politics and participative leadership in the workplace. The findings, unsettling as they are, offer insights that ripple far beyond the borders of the surveyed regions and into a broader, global narrative.

A tale of two leaderships

The research reveals a paradox. In politics, Gen Z respondents exhibited a surprising affinity for authoritarian leadership, defined by centralised power and decisive action. For a generation we might expect to champion the ideals of democracy, their responses indicate a pragmatic acceptance, even a preference, for power concentrated in the hands of a single leader. The justification? The belief that such leaders are better at 'getting things done'.

It is not the kind of leadership we associate with the aspirations of young people, but the survey data paints a clear picture. Respondents linked strong political leadership to national progress, efficiency, and international prestige. They believe this is what their countries need to escape stagnation and corruption. Many surveyed nations, such as Bulgaria, Albania, and Kazakhstan, have only recently emerged from authoritarian rule, and their democratic systems remain fragile. Institutions are weak, corruption is rife, and

What makes this research particularly compelling is how far it resonates.



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In the workplace, respondents favour inclusive and participative leadership.

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economic instability is a persistent shadow. In such an environment, the promise of efficiency and stability is alluring, even at the expense of democratic freedoms.

Yet, when the focus shifts from politics to the workplace, Gen Z’s preferences transform dramatically. Respondents expressed an overwhelming desire for inclusive and participative leadership in the workplace, favouring environments where managers value input, foster collaboration, and encourage autonomy. It’s as if these young people inhabit two entirely different worlds – one where control and decisiveness are paramount and another where freedom and creativity reign.

What drives this contradiction?

Pantelides’s research used a robust methodology to uncover this duality. The study combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, conducted anonymously among 667 undergraduate business students at the American University in Bulgaria between April 2018 and May 2021. The students were from Slovakia, Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. The questions used a Likert scale to gauge preferences for authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles.

Structured interviews complemented the surveys, probing respondents’ motivations deeper. This mixed-methods approach

factors that shaped the students’ responses – fragile institutions, economic instability, and the legacy of authoritarianism – exist elsewhere. Countries in Latin America, such as Venezuela and Brazil, have seen populist leaders rise on promises of swift action and stability. Across sub-Saharan Africa, nations like Zimbabwe and Sudan wrestle with transitions from autocratic rule to democratic governance. In the Middle East and North Africa, countries like Egypt and Iran provide stark examples of how centralised power can entrench itself in the name of national progress.

Even in the West, populism’s appeal has left its mark. The rise of leaders who present themselves as champions of the people, railing against institutional inefficiency, is not a distant phenomenon. Pantelides’s findings suggest that the same forces driving Gen Z’s political pragmatism in transitional democracies are at play globally. If younger generations in fragile democracies increasingly prioritise efficiency over freedom, the global balance of power could shift toward authoritarian models. If this sentiment is not confined to emerging democracies but reflects broader dissatisfaction with governance, even established democracies may find themselves on unstable ground.

A tenuous balance

The paradox within Gen Z’s leadership preferences is not a curiosity – it is a lens through which we can examine the fragility of democracy in a changing world. It challenges us to question assumptions about the universality of democratic values and the resilience of institutions.

The message for countries striving to maintain or establish democratic governance is clear: democracy cannot be taken for granted. It must deliver on its ideals and promises of progress. Failing to do so risks alienating the generation that should inherit and champion it.

In the professional realm, Gen Z’s preference for participative leadership offers hope. It reflects a desire for inclusion and collaboration, values that can counterbalance the authoritarian tendencies they may tolerate in politics. Whether this preference for democratic workplace values translates into broader political ideals remains uncertain.

Pantelides’s research is more than a wake-up call; it reminds us that leadership reflects the realities of the societies it serves. As the world grapples with populism, inequality, and cultural change, understanding the next generation’s leadership expectations may be the key to navigating an uncertain future.

Personal response

What surprised you most about the outcomes of your research, and why?

In my highly interactive leadership course, we discuss multiple leadership theories; I kept noticing that a good number of students were somewhat open to at least some form of authoritarian ‘strong’ leadership concepts, something that went beyond the typical business crisis approach and washed into, at times, national politics. But, these same students became very hesitant when it came to their own careers and daily work management in business when discussing organisational leadership. So, I went into the research with the related hypothesis, but I did not expect the **magnitude** that I found within certain demographics; this is what surprised me the most. Even though these students have not experienced authoritarian politics directly (their parents did), they expressed a higher level of support than what I expected. To me this tends to indicate a socio-cultural factor at work but one which can be transformative. Why? ...because we are also starting to see this in other areas of the world. This is really interesting.

How would you like to see other researchers in your field expand on your findings?

I feel that this area of research can be very interesting for others to expand and build upon because **we are essentially living it today**. First off, I feel it’s important to consider research in Western Europe and compare results there with what we found in our research study. Will there be a similar tendency but perhaps at a lower degree, and what about the rate of change? If you consider populism and the political situations for example in France and Italy, or events such as Brexit in the UK, is it possible to make a connection similar to Eastern Europe? This would be a great area for further research and comparison. In addition, and perhaps more dramatically, recent events in the US and their impact on the educational system can also be very interesting for further study.

Given that the students you studied are of voting age, to what degree do you think the political shifts towards popularism and authoritarian leadership we’re witnessing around the world are an expression of their sentiments?

I feel it may be more significant than we initially thought over the past 10 years. More and more younger people are finding it difficult to establish meaningful livelihoods compared to previous generations, because of high inflation and an overall sense of unfairness. This situation lends itself towards populism where a leader with authoritarian tendencies can step in, via legitimate elections, and promise efforts for the common people. This has

taken place in our area of study and one wonders whether it is spreading westward with recent results in central European nations like Austria. And what about the US, look at what has happened here. This past election, there was a significant vote swing of younger people to the Republicans. Yes, I believe that there is a direct, significant effect.

What human resource policies around leadership should workplaces with a significant young workforce focus on to ensure a productive environment?

I believe that the key factor for a successful and productive work environment where younger employees make up the majority of the workforce is the establishment of a culture of inclusion and clearly demonstrated personal growth. Is this something new? No – but we need to make it more obvious and widespread. This can be difficult depending on factors that go beyond national culture and touch upon organisational culture and perhaps types of business and industries themselves.

In terms of leadership, younger people need to understand that they do have a voice in decisions and how they accomplish their work, and leadership is there to guide and mentor them. Thus leadership, in my view, should foster a sense of entrepreneurship within the organisation, something that can also be a strategic advantage for an organisation. However, at the same time responsibility and consequences need to be clear. I believe that this also leads to a clearer understanding that the work they may be doing does have a purpose of which they are an integral part.

Your study showed that the students could reconcile two seemingly incompatible leadership concepts. What do you think it is about Gen Z that makes them able to do this?

One of the biggest advantages that Gen Z has is instant availability to information. They have the opportunity to access and hopefully self-analyse information almost instantaneously. I see and utilise this in the classroom every day ... asking students to check certain things relating to current business news right then and there as we discuss concepts in strategy and leadership. This, combined with the potential of AI, when used properly, and understanding the pitfalls inherently present in such a situation, provides Gen Z with an enormous potential for flexibility. This flexibility contributes to the development of their own personal perspectives which in turn enables this dichotomy in thinking about leadership. Of course, the pitfalls, the dangers here are qualifying the information that they see – is it authentic? And this, I believe, will be a major challenge.

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Collaborators

Dr Pantelides acknowledges his colleagues in the Business Department at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria for allowing him access to their students in gathering direct relevant data, as well as their overall support of this research.

Bio

Arthur Pantelides is Associate Professor of Management at Virginia Wesleyan University, a leading liberal arts and sciences institution in Virginia, USA. He earned degrees from Boston University and

the George Washington University and has taught a range of courses in strategy and leadership in the US and Europe.

Further reading

Pantelides, A, (2024) Gen Z concepts of leadership: Formulating archetypes based on inter-relational business, political, and generational characteristics. *International Journal of Business and Management*, XII(1), 47–73.

