

# Some Gen Z job applicants are scrubbing campus political activism from their résumés

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## FULL TEXT

Mackenzie, 21, a college senior from Texas, has two résumés: the public one she sends to prospective employers and the private one that nobody sees. They are both accurate descriptions of her experience. But the private résumé, which Mackenzie maintains in case she applies for a job as a community organizer, paints a much more specific and honest picture of her racial justice work on campus and in the community.

"When I applied to [corporate] jobs last summer, I didn't include the Black voting rights group I run or my Black Lives Matter work," said Mackenzie, who spoke on the condition that her last name not be used out of concern for future employment. "I barely include my actual ethnicity, and they don't find out I'm Black until the actual interview."

After a surge of campus activism during the Trump years, a growing number of Gen Z job seekers are now discovering a downside to their political engagement. While employers say they are eager for diversity and advise applicants to "bring their whole selves" to the job hunt, Mackenzie and some of her peers don't trust them to look beyond ideology.

"With disclosure comes exposure," said Kacheyta McClellan, director of diversity, inclusion and belonging at the National Association of Colleges and Employers. He said it has always been an "act of bravery" for job seekers of color to be transparent about community organizing when applying for a job in a different field, even if the skills are transferrable.

"But today's climate is different," he said. "You've got an entire swath of people choosing to believe one thing and another swath choosing to believe differently. It's polarization that's not covert."

So many young partisans are playing it safe, censoring political content from their résumés or limiting their job search to politically friendly bubbles.

Is this the right move? Censored résumés could make young job seekers look less competitive. Mackenzie knows this and isn't happy about it. But she wants to be realistic: As long as she is applying to buttoned-up organizations, she's going to submit a buttoned-up résumé.

"You want to be tolerable within the diversity and inclusion realm [and not be] the person calling out every little systemic issue in the corporation," she said.

Mackenzie can't know for certain, but she believes scrubbing the racial justice component from her résumé worked: Last summer, she was hired to intern with a top-tier public relations firm, a steppingstone for her post-collegiate career plans.

There's no hard evidence to show whether Gen Z résumés are becoming more overtly political, but the demographic has become much more socially and politically engaged around issues from racial justice to gun control.

A spring 2021 poll from Harvard's Institute of Politics found that 36 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds consider themselves politically active, up from 24 percent in 2009. In 2020, 18 percent of young people ages 18 to 24 said they volunteered for a political campaign, compared with just 5 percent in 2016, according to the Center for

Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. And 19 percent of adults ages 18 to 24 said they had joined a protest march, rally or demonstration in 2020, up from 7 percent in 2016, according to an American National Election Studies survey.

Some cities, like the District of Columbia, protect private-sector workers from discrimination based on political affiliation, but political identity is generally not a protected class. "So for the most part, an organization can make a decision on whether to hire you based on your social and political activities," said Edgar Ndjatou, the executive director of the workers' rights nonprofit Workplace Fairness.

This puts some job seekers in a bind, especially younger applicants whose résumés are limited to campus activities and summer internships. "Putting Black Lives Matter on your résumé might prevent you from getting certain jobs," Ndjatou said. "I'd like to think it's not black and white. But people are human, and certainly whether it's the private sector or public sector, you can only do so much to mitigate biases in a selection process."

This hurdle has been well studied. "Hiring managers may initially gravitate toward candidates of their same gender or race due to similarity bias," said Jill Ellingson, a professor of human resource management at the University of Kansas. "But research shows that presenting decision-makers with 'individuating information' like education, job experience and training overrides this bias."

In 2020, Ellingson co-published a study that tested how political identity might influence similarity bias.

Her team gave self-identified Democratic and Republican recruiters mock Facebook pages highlighting job seekers' qualifications and experience alongside a smattering of political cues —like a Black Lives Matter hashtag or a picture of a "Choose Life" license plate.

"Counter to what we expected, the individuating information didn't reduce or remove bias," Ellingson said. "The degree to which an evaluator rated a politically similar candidate positively was so strong that they looked beyond qualifications."

Ellingson believes these findings are unique to our moment. "People are becoming very emotional in terms of how they think about political affiliation and express it," she said. "The political landscape has changed fundamentally. I don't think we would have seen as strong an effect 15 years ago."

The study did not extend to the public sector, where the First Amendment theoretically protects federal employees from discrimination based on their political beliefs. But Ndjatou warns applicants to be cautious. Whether it's Black Lives Matter or a position with the Trump administration, he said, "you still have to consider the time and place."

Young job seekers know it. James August, 22, hopes to become a public school government teacher and believes students could benefit from his hands-on experience: two years on the executive board of the James Madison University College Republicans, as well as local and state-based campaign work for conservative politicians.

"There's a lot of nonpartisan things I learned in partisan jobs," he said. Although he hasn't yet started applying for jobs ahead of his master's degree graduation in 2023, he worries employers won't see past the wall of red. "I'm very conscious of having 'Republican' on my résumé," he said. "The concern is that a hiring manager will have those stereotypes: bigoted, racist, sexist, stupid."

August distinguishes between supporting the policies of former president Donald Trump and supporting Trump the person. But he's not sure an employer would. "I don't want hiring managers to make assumptions about who I am as a person," he said.

Landon Storrs, a historian at the University of Iowa, considers this a reasonable concern. "I do think the shocking, unprecedented things we went through under Trump will have a ripple effect on employment," said Storrs, who has studied the American workforce during the anti-Communist McCarthy era.

She pointed to the last administration's employment practices, such as screening out job candidates who believed in climate change. As a result, she said, "it wouldn't surprise me if people, even if they're trying to be objective and focus on qualifications, will say they have a hard time working with someone on other [political] side."

August believes he'd have trouble getting hired in the Northern Virginia school district where he grew up. Instead, he's leaning toward Harrisonburg or Virginia Beach, where he thinks the school boards would be more amenable to

someone with his partisan background. If that fails, he'd also consider applying to work at a private or a charter school.

The concern cuts both ways. Tamir Harper, 21, a student at American University, also wants to teach public school after he completes his master's degree in education. As a Black man, he says, "it's my duty to ensure that young Black, Brown, even White children understand why we call Breonna Taylor's name and George Floyd's name." But he knows many people who've gone on the job hunt with censored résumés. He may do the same once he starts his job search.

"You can end up going to the Deep South of Georgia where they're looking to ban critical race theory at the state level, and the district may not welcome you with open arms," he said. Given his record of racial justice advocacy, he wonders: "Will the district think I'm too much of a risk?" Already, Harper's résumé omits the term "activist," which he believes has become a cliché and can carry negative connotations for some people.

"If you go to a job and say you're an 'activist' they'll say, 'Oh, you were the one out protesting who shut down businesses,'" Harper said. He prefers the phrase "community engager."

Artful and savvy curation —and even censorship —has long been part of the résumé process. In the 1860s, women learned a hard lesson when they began applying to the federal civil service. "Women who said 'I'm really good' weren't getting jobs, but the women who said 'woe is me' were," said Jessica Ziparo, author of "This Grand Experiment: When Women Entered the Federal Workforce in Civil War-Era Washington, D.C." Over time, Ziparo said, women got wise to the situation and began presenting themselves as poor and needy, even if they weren't. Less than a century later, in the 1940s and 1950s, many Americans were compelled to put on another kind of show. According to Storrs, during the McCarthy era, about a fifth of the U.S. workforce took some kind of loyalty oath or was required to submit a list of extracurricular memberships to employers. As a result, Storrs said that "people who wanted jobs became apolitical and hid things. They stopped signing petitions and joining political clubs."

Ellingson, the University of Kansas professor, tells her students to be honest on their résumés and to apply widely. "Maybe the organization will say, 'We want to provide a balance, so we want to hire students of different political affiliations,'" she said. "The applicant only harms him or herself by choosing not to apply."

Unlike in the McCarthy era, Gen Z job seekers seem unlikely to give up their political activities entirely. But that doesn't mean they trust employers to acknowledge their biases or to bring much nuance to the hiring process. As a liberal-leaning political science major, Phil, 23, feels obligated to understand a diversity of political opinions. In college, he joined a conservative student organization and eventually became its president. "For leadership, it was a formative experience," he said. In other words, résumé gold.

But when he applied to left-leaning internships on Capitol Hill, nobody bit. Phil, who spoke on the condition that his last name not be used out of concern for future employment, removed the club from his résumé and secured interviews. He wondered if it was just a coincidence.

"I would think that someone engaged with their peers across the aisle would have insight into dealmaking in Washington," said Phil.

Phil now works in public policy for a finance firm, but he may well apply to progressive organizations in the future. "I'd have to assess on a case-by-case basis whether I trusted them to see past the [conservative] headline," he said. "Keeping it neutral is probably best."

## DETAILS

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