

A person with a raised fist, wearing a black face mask and a black beanie, is shown in the background. The image is overlaid with a blue and green gradient. The text is white and bold.

CAUSE AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

2020 YEAR IN REVIEW

Research By: Cause & Social Influence)))

LETTER FROM DERRICK FELDMANN

Lead Researcher, Cause and Social Influence

Change. It's never had such opposing meanings for a young American as in 2020.

On the one hand, the daily lives of these young people (ages 18-30) changed drastically. They missed out on graduation ceremonies, face-to-face job interviews, the collegiality of working with others, attending friend and family gatherings. They struggled with the tangible and intangible effects of isolation, job loss and constant uncertainty.

Yet, they rose beyond these personal adversities to help others and try to change the things they felt were wrong.

Before we put 2020's major moments behind us, it's important to see what we can learn about how and why young Americans chose to act. Three major moments in quick succession – a pandemic, George Floyd's death, the election – offer a singular chance to study how digital and non-digital activism reinforce each other and drive social movements.

We're in a fascinating era of engagement. Especially in a pandemic, young Americans could choose to rely on technology to connect and make their voices heard. Instead, traditional offline ways to participate in social issues remain strong, used in conjunction with online activities but not replaced by them. Here's the best example: Based on three years of research, we can confidently state that this age group sees voting as the best way to bring about social change.

What happens now? Interest and participation were gaining momentum heading into 2020. This year showed what young Americans believe they must do to accomplish change. The question now is whether moments in the coming year will warrant the same level of response.



INTRODUCTION

The research team at Cause and Social Influence has long tracked and reported on the actions of young Americans (age 18-30) relevant to major social moments and movements.

From a nationwide pandemic in early spring to demonstrations for racial equity through the summer to a presidential election campaign heading into late fall, 2020 was an opportunity to collect large amounts of such data over an extended time period.

A moment

is a one-time or short-term concentration of informal or organized actions fueled by cultural, political and/or social events or occurrences that yield a surge of individual participation and public self-organizing.

A movement

is a group of people working together to support the interests of a community whose lives are affected by a specific issue; the group often is unable to address the issue and achieve a satisfactory resolution without the support of dedicated community activists and constituents.

A social issue

is an existing topic/situation of interest/concern recognized as being for or against society's general values, yet able to be alleviated through people working together using community resources and/or the political or legislative system.

In 2020, Cause and Social Influence tracked the actions and influences surrounding three major moments in the United States:

- The COVID-19 pandemic,
- The movement for racial equality, anti-discrimination and social justice for Black Americans, and
- The presidential election.

This work resulted in research findings from six separate reports of *Influencing Young America to Act*, all of which can be downloaded at causeandsocialinfluence.com.

This final report of 2020 takes a holistic look at all the data from this year to identify consistencies and help synthesize the key areas of learning to inform future social issue campaigns, efforts and approaches aimed at engaging young Americans. It presents:

- Specific actions and the influences prompting social issue engagement
- Identified consistencies across all three moments

METHODOLOGY

For each study, researchers took a quantitative approach with an online survey fielded to a nationally representative panel based on census-projected ethnic and demographic composition. The response rate for each survey gave the data presented a 95% confidence interval and 3% margin of error. The complete demographic profile for each report is available at causeandsocialinfluence.com.

MARCH	13	US declares national health emergency - COVID-19
	20	COVID-19 survey 1 fielded (n=1,105)
	25	Report released
	30	States begin stay-at-home orders
APRIL	17	COVID-19 survey 2 fielded (n=1,190)
	22	Report released
MAY	15	COVID-19 survey 3 fielded (n=1,049)
	20	Report released
	25	George Floyd, Minneapolis, dies in police custody
	26	US protests against police and systemic racism begin
JUNE	2	Tens of thousands participate in worldwide protests
	8-9	Black Lives Matter survey fielded (n=1,076)
	12	Report released
OCTOBER	7	Pre-election survey fielded (n=1,011)
NOVEMBER	4	Post-election survey fielded (n=1,018)
	9	Report released

We must note that, for demographic data-gathering, researchers asked respondents to self-identify their race/ethnic identity and allowed space for write-in answers. Researchers recognize that identifying people by race and reporting on actions that have to do with race are complex endeavors, and we have done so with the highest consideration. People are much more than their racial or ethnic identity.

We must also note that, in reviewing and analyzing data and drawing conclusions about behavior during the pandemic, researchers acknowledge the restrictions suggested and imposed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), the White House, state and local governments, and businesses and employers.

RESEARCH TEAM

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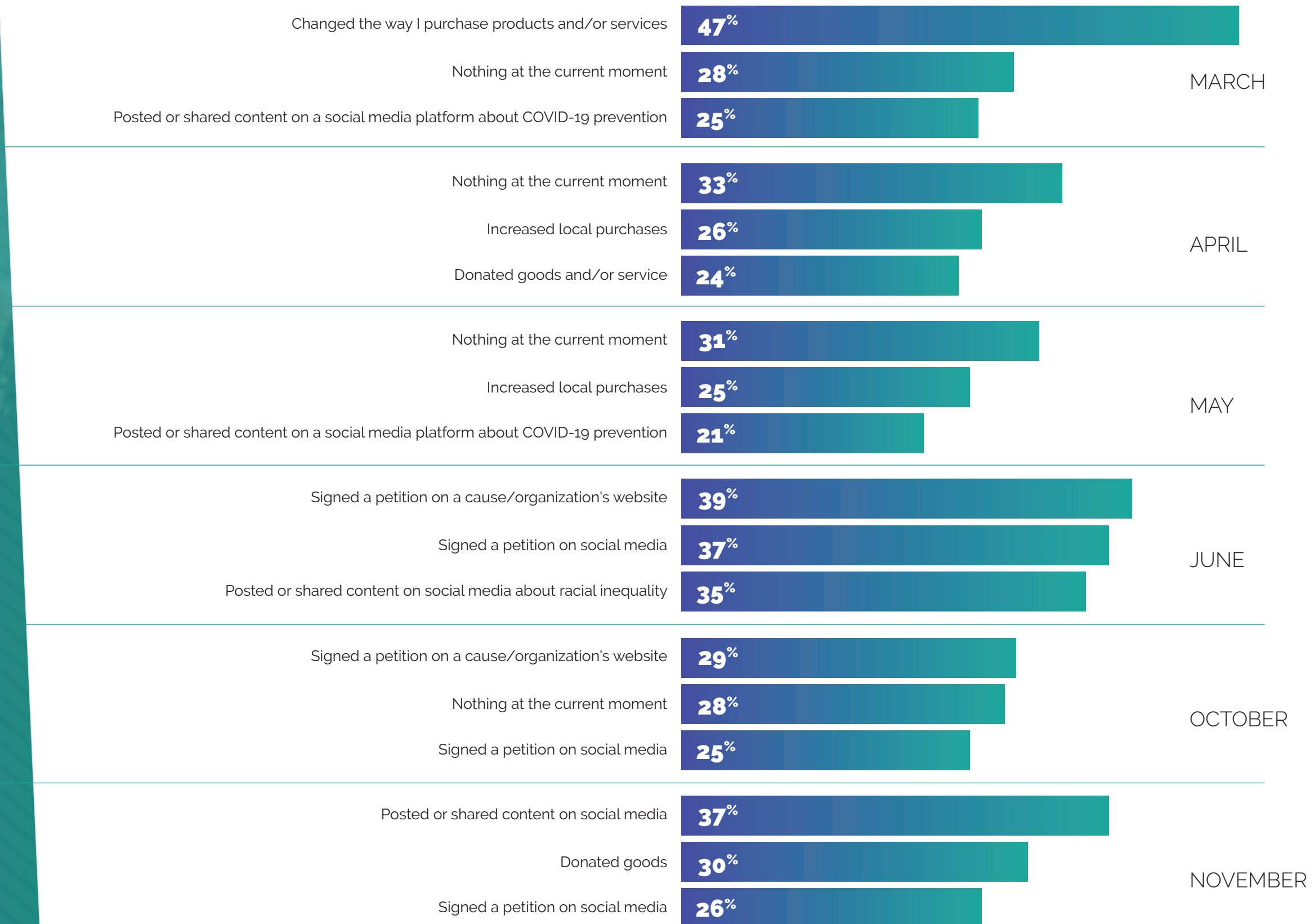
CINDY DASHNAW / Copywriter

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KEY FINDINGS

- 1 THE THREE TOP ACTIONS YOUNG AMERICANS TOOK TO HELP OTHERS IN 2020 WERE TO
 A) CHANGE THE WAY THEY SHOP B) POST/SHARE CONTENT ON A SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM AND C) SIGN PETITIONS.

Leading up to 2020, Cause and Social Influence researchers identified an expanding view of philanthropy among young Americans, one in which actions are considered to have value equal to financial donations. This view was reinforced by the dominance of these three actions as the most effective way to help others throughout the year (of those who acted).



2 CALLS TO ACTION REACHED YOUNG AMERICANS MOST OFTEN THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA.

Though 87% of this audience believes social media contains inaccurate information, calls to action that elicited responses most often reached them via social media.

An entire movement – the call for racial equality and social justice – began when a cellphone video of George Floyd’s death was shared on social media. In the wake of that event, slightly over a third of respondents posted/shared related content. Still, social media actions were the most popular in the 30 days leading up to the presidential election, when 37% of young Americans said they posted or shared content on a social media platform related to the election.

Advertisements on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) and an individual’s social followers/those they follow were two of the three primary influencers that prompted ages 18-30 to action for racial equity. Such advertisements remained the top influence in motivating young Americans to get involved in election-related activities; about a third of those who acted said an online advertisement prompted them to do so.

3 YOUNG AMERICANS GOT THEIR NEWS PRIMARILY ON FACEBOOK AND FROM SOURCES FOX NEWS AND CNN.

Facebook was the top platform for news about 2020 social issues among young Americans, though national cable TV news sustained substantial popularity. While FOX News and CNN traded the lead for the most popular broadcast news channel during the first few months of the pandemic, FOX News took over in June by ranking above CNN for at least 28 consecutive weeks. It’s interesting to note that whenever local news was the source of information for respondents, ABC consistently was the top choice.

4 CELEBRITIES AND ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS AS MOTIVATORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION GREW SIGNIFICANTLY FROM MARCH TO NOVEMBER.

TERMS

- **Online Influencer/Content Creator** – is an individual (not a brand or group) who grew their audience/followers by creating content online and now uses their online presence as a primary profession (excludes celebrities).
- **Celebrity** – is a musician, athlete or actor whose primary profession does not exist online.

At the start of COVID-19, about a third of young Americans relied on online influencers/content creators and a fifth on celebrities for news about the virus. These sources gradually rose in popularity, however, growing with the issues of racial inequality and the presidential election. By November, half of respondents said they were getting their information from online influencers/content creators and not quite a third from celebrities.

USE CELEBRITIES OR ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS AS SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT:

- online influencers/content creators
- celebrities

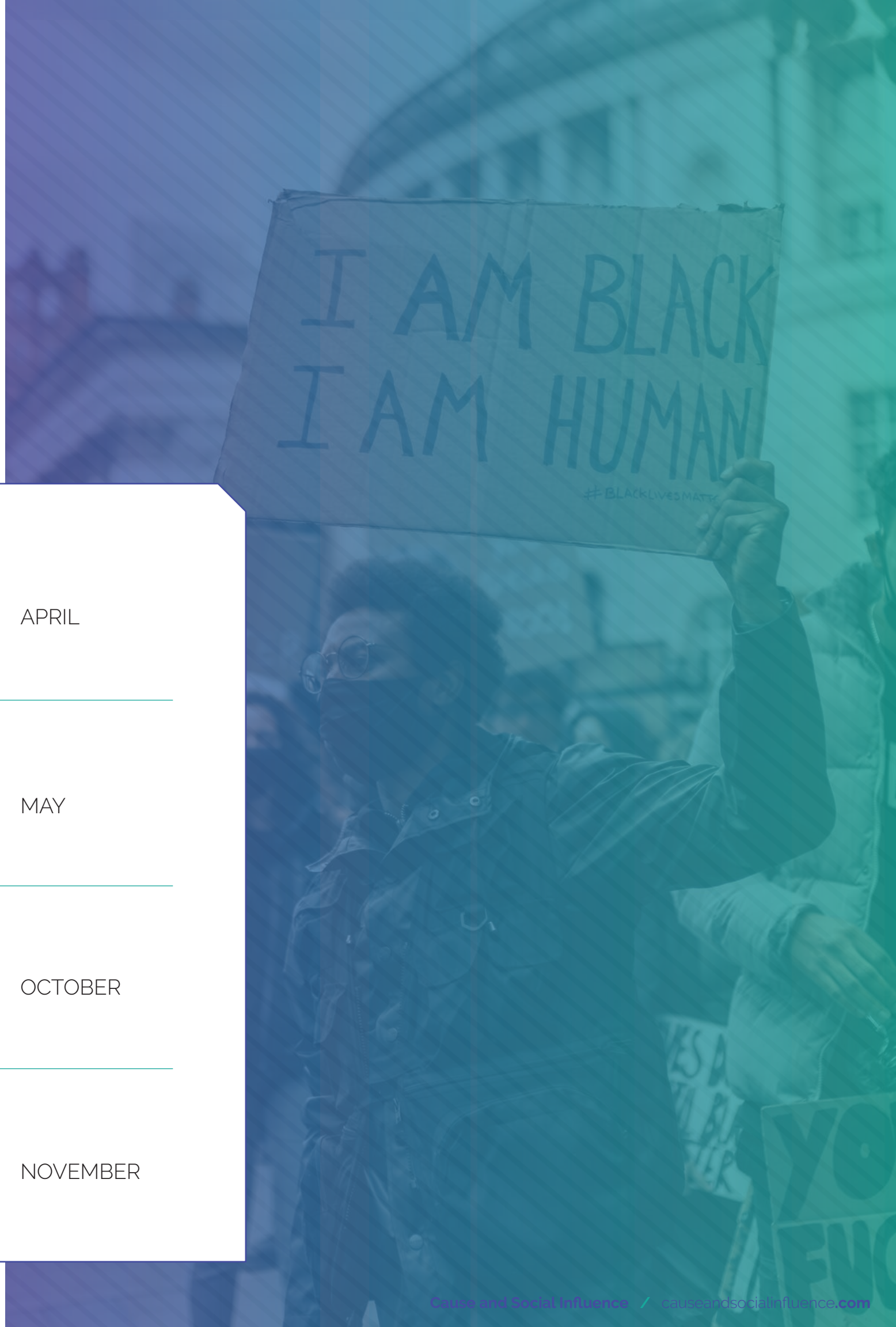
	COVID-19	Black Lives Matter	Election
APRIL	30% 19%		
MAY	19% 25%		
JUNE		52% 32%	45% 23%
OCTOBER			49% 30%

5 ANIMAL RIGHTS, CIVIL RIGHTS/RACIAL DISCRIMINATION/SOCIAL JUSTICE, CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTHCARE REFORM WERE THE TOP SOCIAL ISSUES FOR WHICH YOUNG AMERICANS VOLUNTEERED IN 2020.

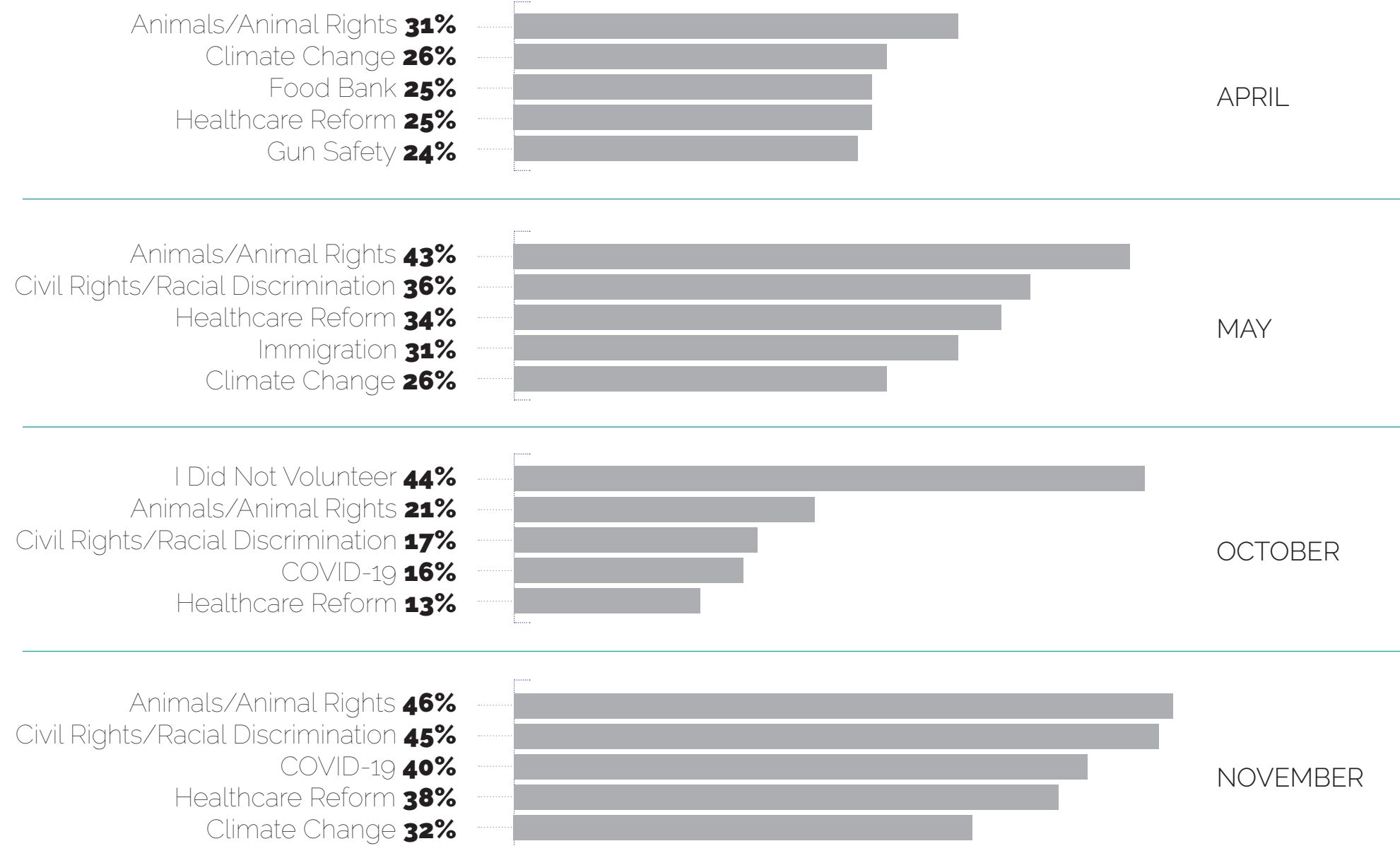
Of those who volunteered, animal rights commanded the top spot overall for doing so four out of four times. By Election Day, civil rights/racial discrimination/social justice at 45% had nearly tied with animal rights at 46%.

Though climate change wasn't in the top five causes for financial donations among this group, it did rank fairly high among causes for which to volunteer.

We must note that October saw a significant decline in volunteering across all social issues; 44% of respondents said they had not volunteered for any cause.



FOR WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL ISSUES AND/OR CAUSES DID YOU VOLUNTEER?



6 ANIMAL RIGHTS, HEALTHCARE REFORM AND FOOD BANKS WERE THE TOP SOCIAL ISSUES FOR WHICH YOUNG AMERICANS MADE DONATIONS IN 2020.

The percentage of young Americans who gave to support specific social issues in 2020 exceeded 2019 giving. Donating goods, another consistent action all year, tripled from 10% the two years prior to the pandemic to 30% in October.

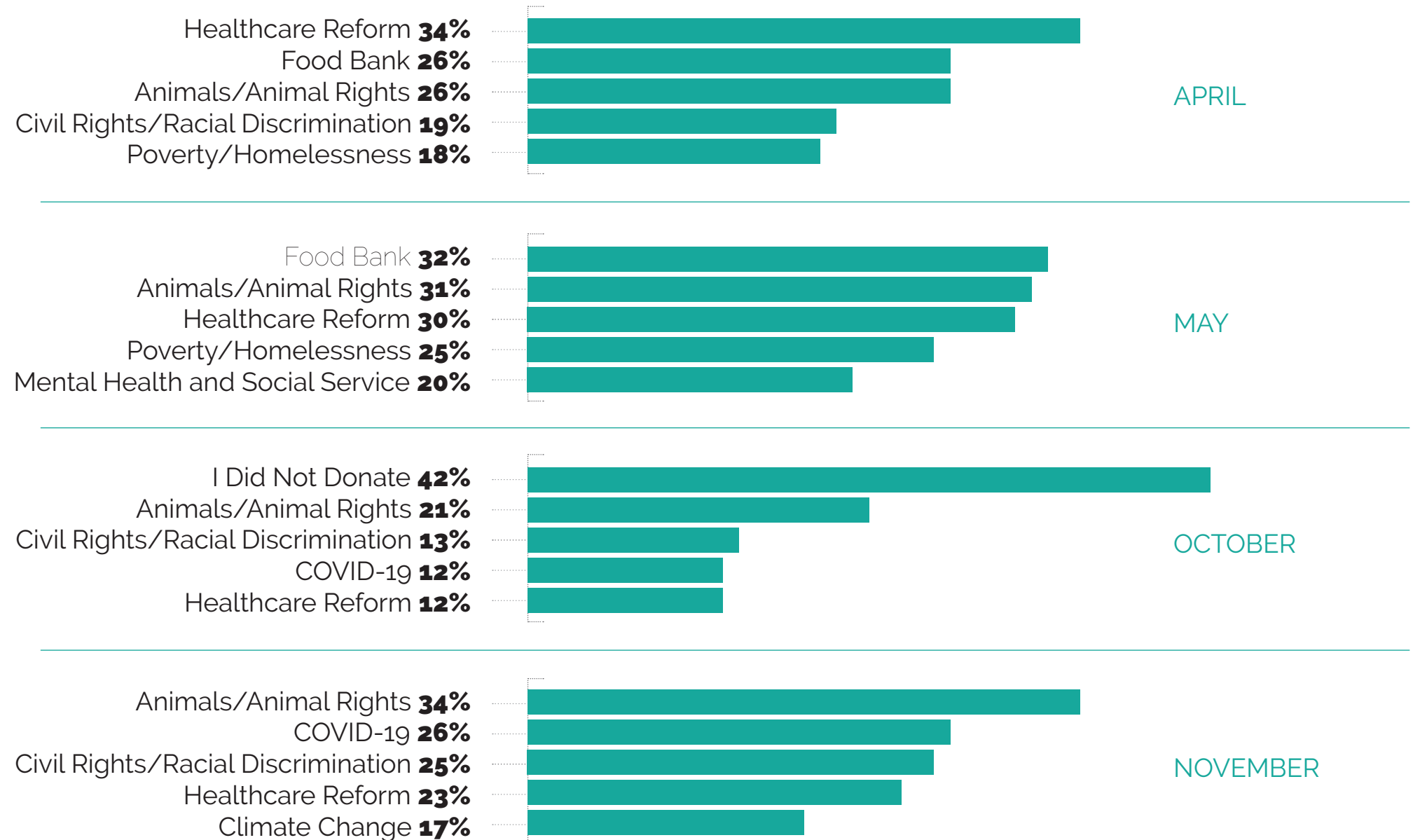
In each 2020 survey, one or more of these three issues – animal rights, healthcare reform and food banks – were in the top three for a third of respondents in each survey. In addition, civil rights/racial discrimination/social justice, poverty/homelessness and COVID-19 received donations from at least 25% of responses at some point in the year.

Even in November, when a significant portion of young American voters based their presidential candidate preference on racial equity, animals/animal rights was the issue to which the most young Americans made donations (34%). Some donated to support a candidate (27%), and/or in response to the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and/or the Supreme Court nomination of Amy Coney Barrett (17%).

Two notes of interest: i) October saw a significant decline in giving across all social issues; 42% of respondents said they had not donated to any cause. ii) During a pandemic, donations to support healthcare reform declined overall while giving to other top issues rose.

Half of our November respondents said they'd be donating the same amount to the causes they normally support even after the election, while a third said they'd give less. These numbers are not quite as rosy as they were in October, however, so they bear watching in real time.

FOR WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL ISSUES AND/OR CAUSES DID YOU DONATE?



HOW WILL YOUR GIVING TO CAUSES CHANGE AFTER THE ELECTION?

	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER
I will be giving less to causes I normally support	20%	34%
I will be giving the same amount to causes I normally support	64%	49%
I will be giving more to causes I normally support	16%	16%

7 YOUNG AMERICANS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORTED A PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE BASED ON HIS POSITION TOWARD RACIAL EQUITY.

Even as the numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths were spiking in early October, two-thirds of respondents overwhelmingly planned to cast their vote based on a candidate’s stance on racial equity. This may foreshadow the enduring nature of racial inequality concerns and indicate the commitment of young people to creating systemic change for Black Americans and people of color. In the November 4 survey, 60% said they voted for Joe Biden and 28% for Trump, which was consistent with what they said they’d do a month earlier.

RESPONDENTS CITED THE FOLLOWING ISSUES AS THEIR TOP 5 REASONS FOR CHOOSING A SPECIFIC CANDIDATE:

Black Lives Matter (racial inequality, discrimination and injustice toward Black Americans)	59%
COVID-19 (Coronavirus)	44%
Budget and the economy	43%
Civil rights/racial discrimination/social injustice (related to ethnicities/minorities other than Black Americans)	42%
Healthcare reform	38%

FOR WHICH 2020 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE WILL YOU VOTE?
OCTOBER

Joe Biden	64%
Donald Trump	30%

FOR WHICH 2020 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE DID YOU VOTE?
NOVEMBER 4

Joe Biden	60%
Donald Trump	28%

8 YOUNG AMERICANS BELIEVE CORPORATIONS CAN INFLUENCE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS RELATED TO SOCIAL ISSUES AND TRUST THEM MORE TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT.

The vast majority of young Americans believe companies can have a “great deal” or “some” influence on attitudes and behaviors related to all three of 2020’s moments – the pandemic, the election and racial inequality. They did not report taking an action as a direct result of a company’s request. However, they did list companies among the many sectors and organizations that encouraged them to vote (local 37%, national 42%).

INDIVIDUALS/ENTITIES THAT ENCOURAGED RESPONDENTS TO VOTE

Family member	56%
Peer/friend	55%
A cause or organization I follow	49%
My followers/those I follow in social networks	48%
Saw the opportunity in an advertisement online – e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	48%
Online influencer or content creator – e.g., an individual (not a brand or group) whose persona is primarily online	45%
Saw an advertisement not online – e.g., on a billboard, print ad, live television, radio, streaming media (Netflix, Hulu, Spotify, etc.)	45%
A NATIONAL company I buy products, goods and services from	42%
Heard/saw information about registering to vote/voting in a movie (non-documentary) or television show (not an ad)	41%
Neighbor or neighborhood group	38%
A work colleague	38%
A LOCAL company I buy products, goods and services from	37%
Watched a documentary about registering to vote/voting	36%
Received information from my place of employment	36%

In our previous two years of research, respondents’ trust of companies was low (of nonprofits, social movements, corporations, and governments, corporations came in last at 55%).¹ In 2020, however, young Americans looked to companies to use their power for good. In March, 80% of respondents believed companies had the power to exert some or a great deal of influence over people’s attitudes toward virus prevention. In June, business had a slight edge over the federal government in young Americans’ trust to do what’s right about racial equity. And when it came to ensuring a fair election, similar levels of respondents (about 50%) trusted companies, the federal government, members of Congress and the candidates. They saw more potential only in nonprofits, social movements and people like themselves.

¹ Cause and Social Influence. Influencing Young Americans to Act 2019.

IN-DEPTH

COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS) PANDEMIC

The United States confirmed its first case of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) on January 21, 2020. On March 11, WHO declared a global pandemic; nine days later, Cause and Social Influence began its surveys. As we collected data, young Americans and the public at large began losing income, children couldn't go to school and the disease became politically divisive. By Election Day, each state was testing its own prevention and reopening efforts.

THE FOLLOWING FINDINGS REFLECT NOTABLE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS RELATED TO THIS MOMENT IN 2020.

Young Americans viewed shopping local as the best way to help others weather the pandemic.

Leading up to 2020, Cause and Social Influence researchers identified an expanding view of philanthropy among young Americans, one in which actions (e.g., volunteering) are considered to have equal value to their financial gifts. This view was reinforced by the support of local business (an action) as the most effective way to help others with the pandemic, which started in March (with 47%) and remained at the top until June (when another social issue dominated the zeitgeist).

In other pandemic-related actions, a quarter of the sample shared information about prevention (slowing the spread) on social media. Making a donation was at 10%, volunteering for a cause or charitable organization in person at 6%, and being a virtual or online volunteer at 9%. More than a quarter (28%) made no changes at all to help others.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS HAD MORE INFLUENCE THAN CELEBRITIES AND ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS ON YOUNG AMERICANS' BEHAVIOR DURING THE PANDEMIC.

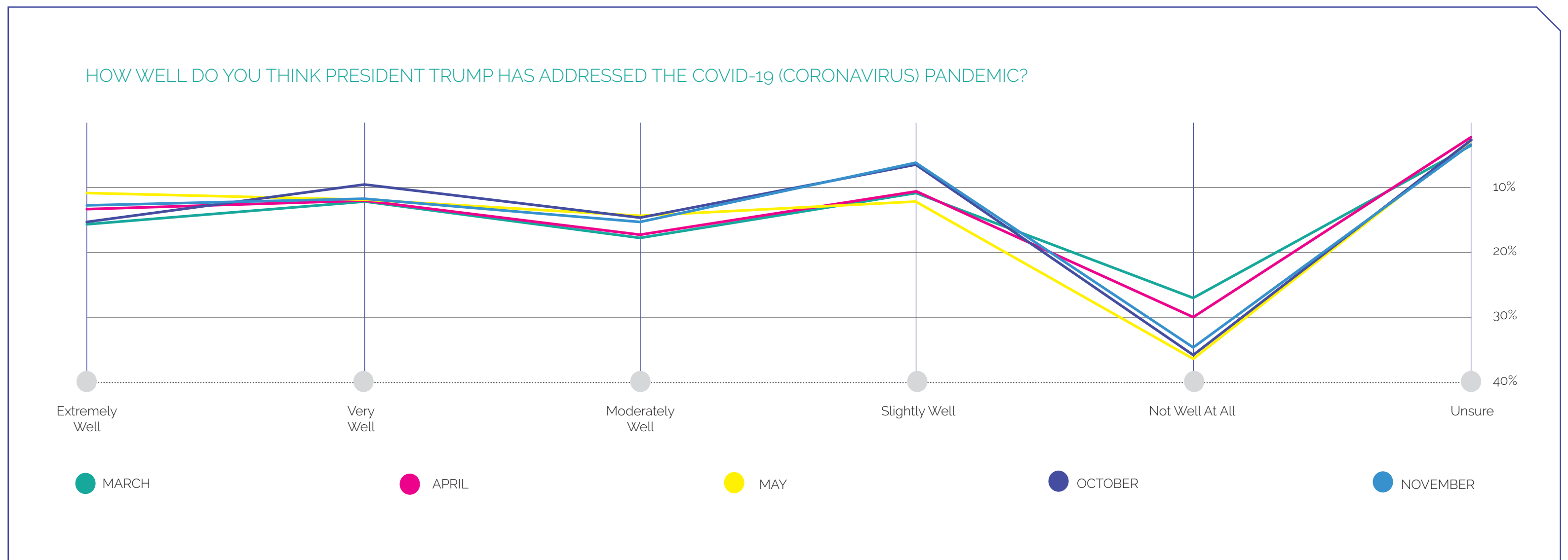
For the young Americans who took steps to slow the spread of COVID-19 immediately, it was from the influence of family and friends more than any other source, with a quarter crediting this group. It should be noted that at this time, most Americans were encouraged to stay at home and virus information was limited.

More than half of young Americans (58%) first got news about the virus from cable TV news media, primarily FOX News and CNN, with "news media websites" and "social media networks that share news" as the next most-frequent sources (39% each). The use of celebrities and online influencers/content creators began to rise in May but did not displace cable news.

% OF YOUNG AMERICANS WHO USED CELEBRITIES OR ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS AS SOURCES OF PANDEMIC NEWS



RESPONDENTS WERE MORE COMPLIMENTARY THAN CRITICAL OF TRUMP'S HANDLING OF THE PANDEMIC, YET THE TREND STEADILY DECLINED. In March, less than a third of young Americans said the president was not handling the pandemic well at all. That figure steadily rose through the election to reach 37% on November 4.





IN-DEPTH

THE DEATH OF GEORGE FLOYD

ON JUNE 6, THE NEW YORK TIMES REPORTED:

"Demonstrations across the United States, which began as spontaneous eruptions of outrage after the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police less than two weeks ago, appeared to have cohered ... into a nationwide movement protesting systemic racism."

ACTIVISM BY YOUNG AMERICANS SURGED FOLLOWING GEORGE FLOYD'S DEATH.

On social media and in person, the backlash was swift. Young Americans led protests across the country and around the world to demand law enforcement reform. Though health officials were still recommending social distancing to lessen the threat of COVID-19 transmission, our research showed that the overriding concern of young Americans had become the issue of racial equity.

Initially (June), 21% of all respondents reported taking no action at all to address racial inequality, discrimination and social injustice. However, substantially fewer Black (12%) than white/Caucasian (32%) Americans said they took no action at this time. By October, the overall figure had risen; 28% of this age group said they'd taken no action at all, again with substantially fewer Black (14%) than white/Caucasian (32%) Americans choosing not to act.

Especially for Black Americans, signing petitions was the action of choice to address this social issue. For white/Caucasian Americans, posting on social media had a slight edge.

JUNE

Signed petition provided on a cause or organization's website	39%
Signed a petition being shared on social media	37%
Posted or shared content on a social media platform about racial inequality, discrimination and social injustice	35%
Nothing at the current moment	21%
Donated goods	20%

OCTOBER

Signed a petition provided on a cause or organization's website	29%
Nothing during the last 30 days	28%
Signed a petition being shared on social media	25%
Donated goods	22%
Posted or shared content on a social media platform about racial inequality, discrimination or social injustice	18%

CAUSES AND ORGANIZATIONS WERE THE MOST EFFECTIVE MOTIVATORS AMONG BLACK AMERICANS.

What inspired Black Americans to take action? A cause or organization asked them to. The biggest influences on white/Caucasian respondents were social media followers (36%), a petition being circulated on social platforms (34%) or an organization hosting a petition on its website (34%).

THE USE OF CELEBRITIES OR ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS AS NEWS SOURCES ROSE SIGNIFICANTLY AMONG BLACK AMERICANS FROM THE SPRING.

The use of celebrities or online influencers/content creators as news sources rose significantly among Black Americans from prior research, with only a quarter saying they did not use these sources (along with nearly half of whites/Caucasians stating the same). When looking at the entire national sample without racial breakdowns, the one-third in June who did not use celebrities or online influencers/content creators was a big drop from those who said the same prior to Floyd's death (60% in April and 48% in May).

About a third of each racial population got their news about this issue from a social media site that shared news. Among those respondents, Black Americans were predominant: 62% said they used social media sources "very often" or "often," echoed by 46% of white/Caucasian Americans.

IN-DEPTH

THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

During this research period, Democrat Joseph Biden challenged incumbent Republican Donald Trump for president. Due to the pandemic, a record number of ballots were cast early and by mail; in the end, the total number of votes (mail and in person) was the highest since 1900, and Biden received more votes than any presidential candidate in history. Per our sample, 76% of young Americans voted in the 2020 election, and two-thirds of their votes were for Biden.

The following findings reflect notable attitudes and behaviors related to this moment in 2020.

THREE-QUARTERS OF YOUNG AMERICANS TOOK AN ACTION RELATED TO THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.

By October, more than three-fourths of young Americans said they were registered to vote, and three-fourths had taken another election-related action (in addition to registering). Of the latter, a quarter requested a mail-in ballot and a fifth signed a petition shared on social media by a candidate, campaign or party website. In November, the most popular action (after voting) was wearing an "I Voted" sticker, presumably because so many cast a vote.

OF YOUNG AMERICANS WHO TOOK ACTION RELATED TO THE ELECTION (OCTOBER):

Requested mail-in ballot	26%
Signed a petition being shared on social media by a 2020 candidate, campaign or party's website	19%
Watched a 2020 election debate	16%

OF YOUNG AMERICANS WHO TOOK ACTION RELATED TO THE ELECTION (NOVEMBER):

ACTIONS TAKEN IN LAST 30 DAYS:

Wore a voting sticker	40%
Watched a 2020 election debate	28%
Shared a polling (voting) location with friends or family	18%
Participated in a 2020 campaign-related march and/or rally	17%
Nothing during the last 30 days	17%

ACTIONS TAKEN ON ELECTION DAY:

Wore a voting sticker	38%
Nothing on Election Day	26%
Volunteered in person with a 2020 campaign	18%
Shared a polling (voting) location with friends or family	12%
Volunteered online or virtually with a 2020 campaign	12%

ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS WERE THE TOP SOURCE OF ELECTION NEWS.

Nearly half of respondents (45%) said they relied on online influencers/content creators for news about the election.

DO YOU GET NEWS ABOUT THE 2020 ELECTION FROM CELEBRITIES OR ONLINE INFLUENCERS/CONTENT CREATORS?

Online influencers or content creators (use their online presence as a primary profession)	45%
I do not obtain news from celebrities or online influencers/content creators	43%
Celebrities - musicians, athletes or actors whose primary professions do not exist online	23%

ADS ON SOCIAL MEDIA HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE ON YOUNG AMERICANS' ELECTION-RELATED ACTIONS.

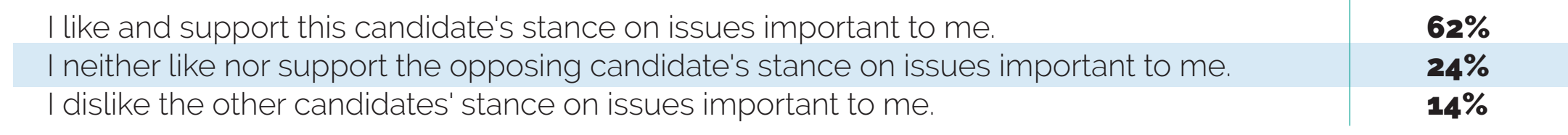
Advertisements online (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) had the greatest influence on whether young Americans took actions related to the election. The top influence reported in October (29%) and November (36%) was the same: "Saw the opportunity in an advertisement online." The other three influences for both months were "a cause or organization I follow," "saw the opportunity in an advertisement not online," and "no one asked me to take action; I acted on my own," though in a different order each month.

THOSE WHO TOOK ACTION RELATED TO THE ELECTION:

OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	INFLUENCE
29%	36%	Saw the opportunity in an online ad (e.g., Facebook)
25%	17%	No one asked me; I acted on my own
22%	29%	Acted at the request of a cause or organization I follow
12%	18%	Saw the opportunity not online (e.g., billboard, TV)



WHY DID YOU SELECT YOUR CANDIDATE?



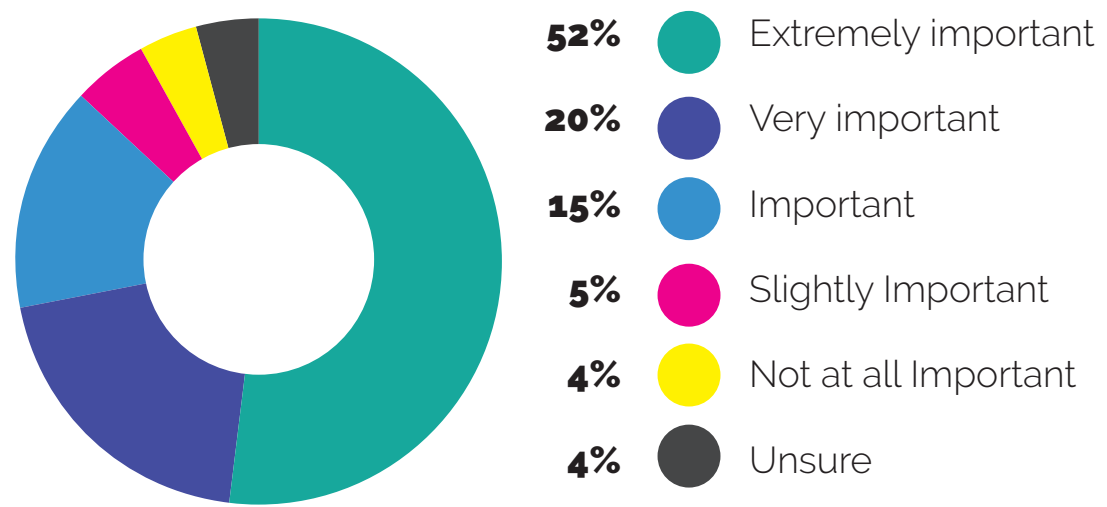
As a result, Biden was the candidate of choice for two-thirds of young Americans.

YOUNG AMERICANS ENJOYED THE VOTING EXPERIENCE AND BELIEVE VOTING IS IMPORTANT.

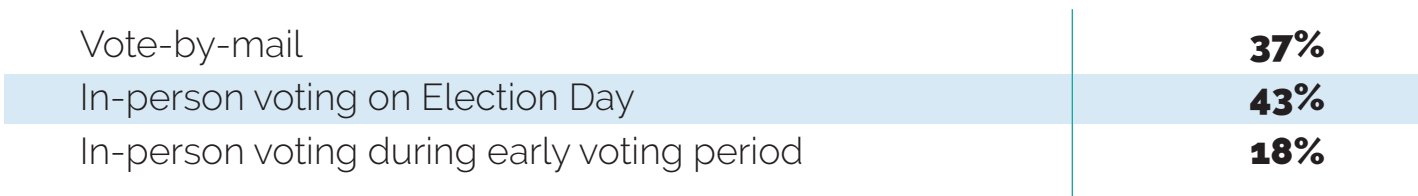
Forty-three percent (43%) said they rated their voting experience high because, "I had a voice in the 2020 presidential election. I think my vote matters this year." More than 90% said voting was important (with 52% rating it "extremely important").

In response to questions about their voting experience, 57% of young Americans said they went to the polls with other people (friends, family, coworkers) to vote. A little over a quarter waited more than 2 hours to vote, but this did not seem to affect their experience negatively.

HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU BELIEVE VOTING IN THE 2020 ELECTION TO BE?



THOSE WHO DID VOTE CAST THEIR BALLOTS IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:



CONCLUSION

Young Americans faced unparalleled social moments in 2020. In response, a tidal wave of young Americans rose to help others and bring change to issues they care about. All projections in the area of social issue engagement by this age group were nullified by the unforeseeable nature and number of the major moments of 2020.

Many young people increased the actions researchers have been concerned about in recent years. Their participation rose in traditional modes of engagement, such as charitable giving and volunteering. The phenomenal increase in charitable giving is the standout example. Giving had held steady at 9% of this age group for three years; it doubled in 2020, during a time when this cohort was struggling economically and with employment.

Some who work with causes and nonprofits are always concerned about a decline in the civic and social issue engagement of young Americans. Those trends have changed in 2020. We cannot deny the potential for this group's participatory behavior.

Our challenge now is this: Under a new administration, the economic situation created by COVID-19 and the realities of how individuals now see the world, how do we keep this momentum going? It's up to us to take cues from this group and find ways to further their interest and willingness to act.