



# CIVIC LIFE TODAY: A MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVE



POINTS OF LIGHT

SEPTEMBER 2021

# INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was just the first of a series of major events that turned 2020 into one of the most active and meaningful years of civic engagement this country has ever seen. While the pandemic initially prompted plenty of action on its own, other significant occurrences further transformed life for Americans: nationwide demonstrations on racial equity, a contentious U.S. presidential election and an assault on the U.S. Capitol.

To truly understand the civic responses and opportunities these events catalyzed, Points of Light – long committed to building a society that identifies and builds paths for civic engagement – embarked on a series of actions and research studies to help individuals, businesses and nonprofit organizations find rewarding roles within civic life.

In April 2020, the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) reported that two-thirds of Americans agreed with the statement, “As horrible as it is, this pandemic will lead to changes for the better in how we live, work and treat each other as people.” Points of Light’s own [research](#) that year documented a real surge in civic involvement among U.S. adults and advised organizations to prepare for greater post-pandemic engagement projected by the data. Points of Light created the [Civic Circle](#) to help individuals understand that doing good comes in many forms and to help connect them to opportunities to influence social issues. This framework also helps organizations identify the pathways to involvement their audiences can seek.

Now, in 2021, would last year’s evidence of mounting intention and desire convert into action? Would attitudes among millennials (ages 25-40) change as they moved into the roles of parents and nonprofit leaders? To find out, Points of Light focused its research this year on the civic engagement of millennials. This report shares how a concentration of extraordinary experiences in a brief period of time has influenced the civic involvement of the country’s largest generation in history and whether their intentions to do more for society have or are likely to come to fruition.

## UNLEASHING PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT

Points of Light researchers found that the social issues prompting civic action have become highly personal for millennials. As uncertainty and fear are keeping some away from civic participation, many others are devoting time to educating themselves about social issues they find relevant to their own lives.

This situation begs a couple of questions. First, what kind of information are businesses and nonprofits making available to these inquisitive millennials? And second, when these millennials are ready to engage, will they find an entry through the Civic Circle that appeals to them? Will they discover the chance to become a true, equal partner with companies and nonprofits in effecting social change?

As researchers delved into the personal nature of today’s social issues, they uncovered a large population of individuals who do not fit the popular profile of someone who is active civically. Discoveries made about other categories of civically active millennials reveal a ripe opportunity for engaging new audiences via the entry points of the Civic Circle, especially for organizations willing to embrace real diversity of thought.



## PROFILE: CIVICALLY ACTIVE MILLENNIALS

	Profile: WHITE MILLENNIALS	Profile: BIPOC MILLENNIALS
<b>Age</b>	35-40	25-29
<b>Gender</b>	male	female
<b>Marital status</b>	married	married
<b>Education</b>	4-year degree or higher	4-year degree
<b>Employment</b>	works full time	works full time
<b>Annual earnings</b>	> \$100,000	< \$50,000
<b>Location of residence</b>	Midwest	South
<b>Church attendance</b>	Never	Either never, or more than once a week
<b>Important issues</b>	COVID-19 Mental health/social services Climate change Employment (job creation)	COVID-19 Mental health/social services Wages (incr. minimum wage) Civil rights

### AN IMPORTANT NOTE

It's important to note that individuals on opposite sides of a social issue may each see themselves as equally (and highly) civically active. For example, those who participate in a gun-rights march consider themselves just as civically engaged as gun-control proponents. Remember, too, that human nature tends to make us dismiss those we disagree with. As Ohio University's Dr. Mark Alicke wrote in *Psychology Today*, "When people disagree with us, their disagreement not only influences the validity of our beliefs, but it calls into question our personal identities - the kind of people we want to believe we are."

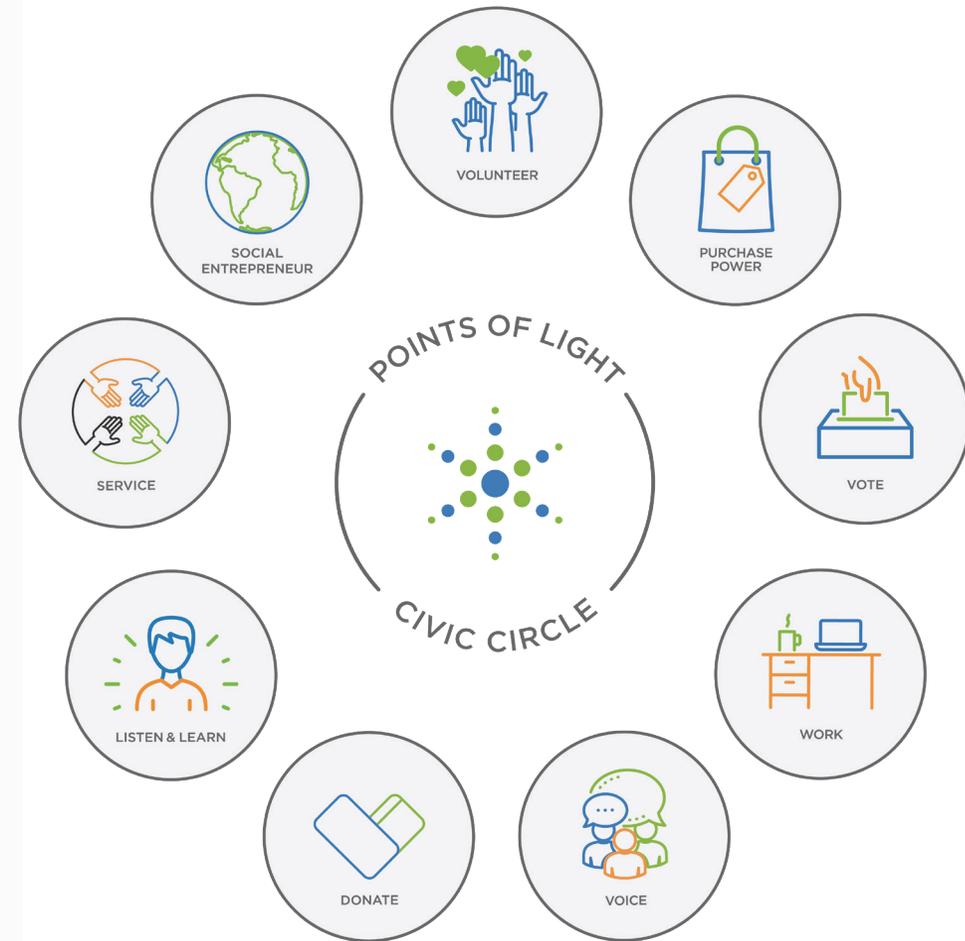
Nonprofits and companies must guard against this pitfall. Instead, use the Civic Circle to position opportunities for unfamiliar individuals to learn about a social issue in non-confrontational ways.

---

### WHAT IS THE CIVIC CIRCLE?

The Civic Circle helps individuals connect to opportunities and understand that social issue influence and action comes in many forms. It's a framework that represents an individual's power to lead and influence their civic life and to lead, lend support to and take action for causes they care about.

---



## METHODOLOGY

Points of Light commissioned INFLUENCE|SG to design and execute this year's research study on millennials and civic engagement. The research team took a quantitative approach with a mobile-optimized online survey of a nationally representative sample of millennials (ages 25-40) based on U.S. Census-projected ethnic and demographic composition. The survey included questions from the annual [Corporate Social Mind](#) benchmark study, which measures consumer and public attitudes toward social issue engagement and consumer action and purchasing intent. For all segments identified in this report, the research team defined 5% variance from the aggregate as being notable in the Highlights sections. For demographic data-gathering, researchers asked respondents to self-identify their gender and race/ethnic identity.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>U.S. millennials (ages 25-40)</b>
<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>N=1,505 + 80 in the Asian American demographic</b>
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	<b>White n=1,098. Black n=200. Asian n=139. Multiple races n=28. American Indian or Alaska Native n=23. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander n=12. Middle Eastern or North African n=5. Some other race n=40.</b>
<b>Confidence Interval</b>	<b>99%</b>
<b>Margin of Error</b>	<b>+/- 3%</b>
<b>Timing</b>	<b>June 28-July 2, 2021</b>



# SOCIAL ISSUES

## THE SOCIAL ISSUES MILLENNIALS CARE ABOUT TODAY REFLECT HOW PERSONAL ISSUES HAVE BECOME.

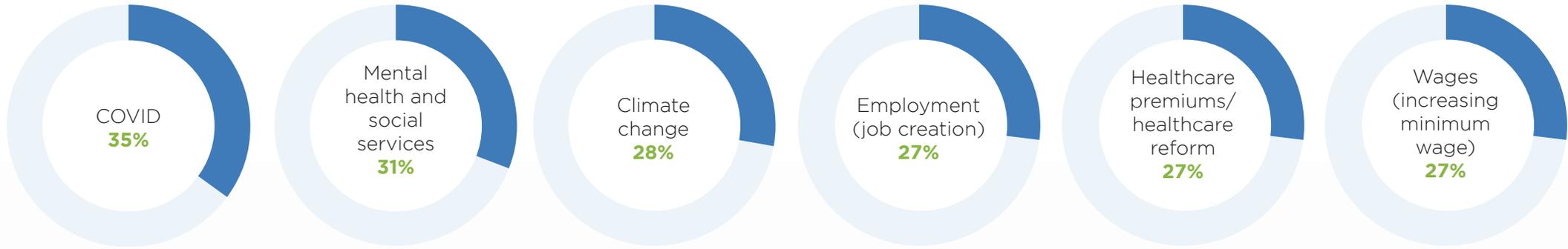
In 2020, economic uncertainty, fear for one's health and safety, strife between friends and family members over differing political opinions and a sudden strong demand for diversity, equity and inclusion turned normal life on its head, and no group felt it more than millennials. According to the [Brookings Institution](#), "Younger generations ... are bearing the brunt of outsized job losses, evictions and ... disruptions in education [from the pandemic]. For older millennials ... many of them never fully recovered from the 2007-2009 Great Recession." The quote from the Edelman Report referenced earlier, "This pandemic will lead to changes for the better in how we live, work and treat each other as people," clearly speaks to how deeply this generation has felt the social issues resulting from the pandemic.

Social issues had become as personal as they could get. No longer were millennials focused primarily on helping others; they suddenly were affected by society's ills themselves and had to address their own challenges, some for the very first time. COVID had changed the way they and their families accessed school, work, friends and each other.

It's no surprise, then, that millennials ranked COVID as their top concern, followed closely by mental health and social services. The [CDC](#) has consistently reported that millennials have had the highest rate of anxiety and depression during isolation. In fact, five of the six social issues millennials said were of most interest to them are pandemic-related (see chart). Even their concern over climate change makes sense as a personal issue in the context of an uncertain time – it's something they've traditionally viewed as directly affecting their future and must especially seem so when so many have experienced losses from flooding, drought, wildfires and power failures that left them vulnerable to nature (as happened in Texas in February 2021).



## TOP SOCIAL ISSUES FOR MILLENNIALS (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



### A NOTE ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE AND OTHER ISSUES:

Though this section focuses on the top social issues of concern to millennials, readers are cautioned not to assume that other issues have been forgotten. The environment (26%), women's rights and animals/animal rights (each 25%), and poverty/homelessness and civil rights/racial discrimination/social justice (each 24%) are all within 3 points of the fourth-most concerning issue addressed here. Moreover, civil rights/racial discrimination/social justice cannot wholly be separated from health issues and healthcare ([American Public Health Association](#)) or employment and wage issues ([SHRM](#)). Given the events of the last year, companies and nonprofits should look at ways to address social justice through other issues.

### HIGHLIGHTS:

(As noted in the Methodology section of this report, highlighted statistics reflect differences of +/- 5% in data from their categories' aggregates. Inclusion does not necessarily imply a correlation among them.)

#### Mental health

Young suburban females showed the most interest in mental health and social services issues, with a 14% difference between the genders (female 38%, male 24%).

#### Climate change

The most concern about climate change came from respondents earning \$50,000-\$99,999 (32%) and the least among those earning less than \$50,000 (23%).

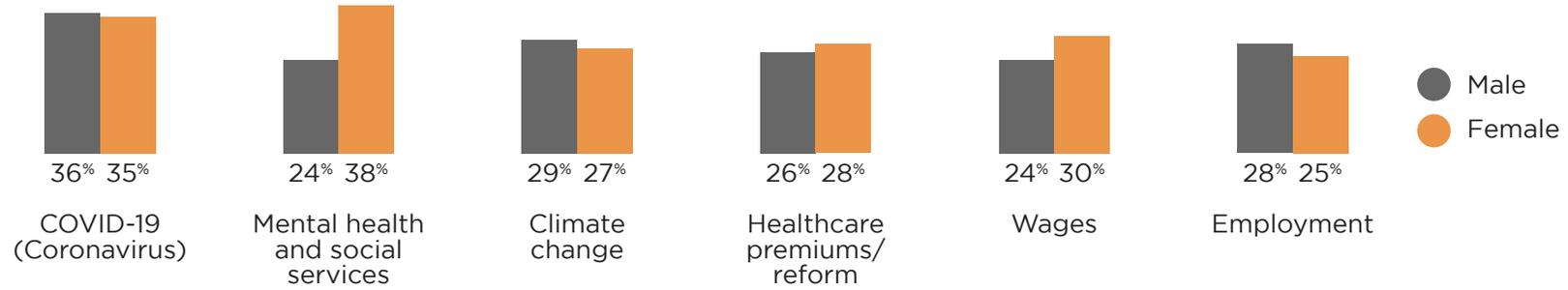
#### Healthcare

Asian respondents drove up the interest in healthcare, with 33% selecting it as their number-one issue. Along with a high interest in COVID, health is a top priority for Asian millennials.

#### Wages

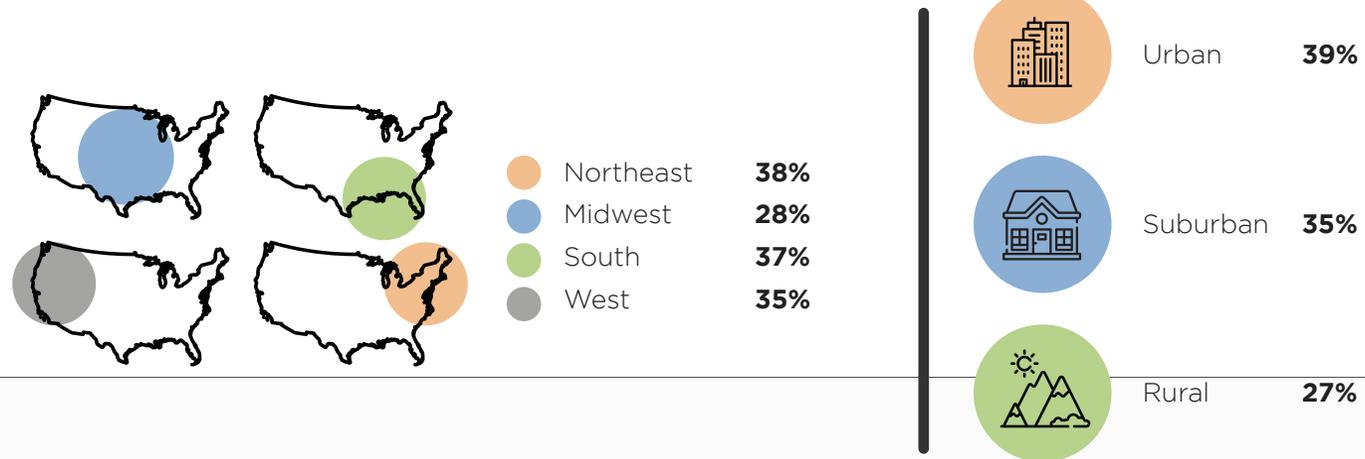
Female (30%), Black American (33%) and earning \$50,000-\$99,999 (33%) respondents were most concerned about wages.

**GENDER COMPARISON:** Which Social Issues are You Most Interested In?

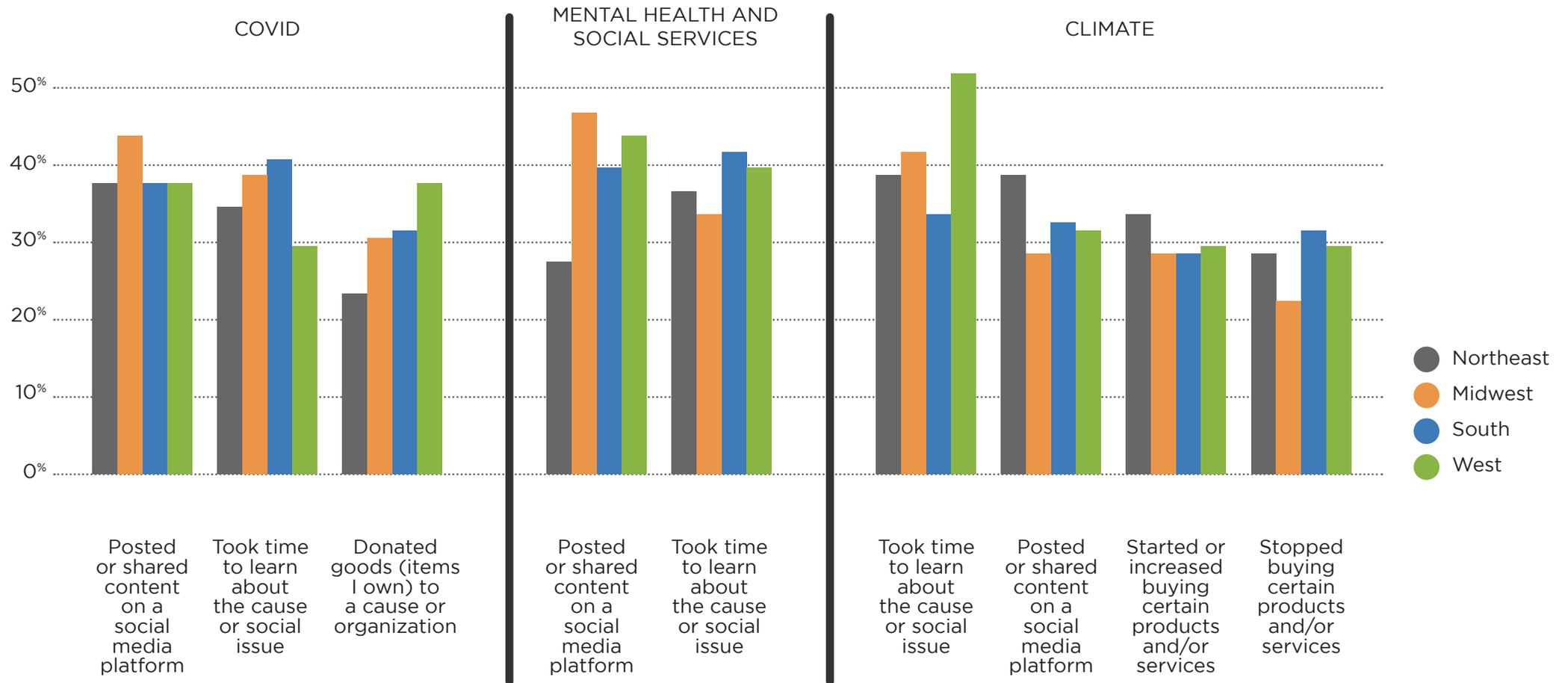


**COVID** - Asian (46%) and Hispanic (40%) respondents showed the strongest interest in COVID as a social issue. On the other side of a wide gap were those in the Midwest (28%) and rural areas (27%). This complements recent data showing “vaccinations are reaching larger shares of Hispanic, Asian and Black populations compared to overall vaccinations.” ([Kaiser Family Foundation](#))

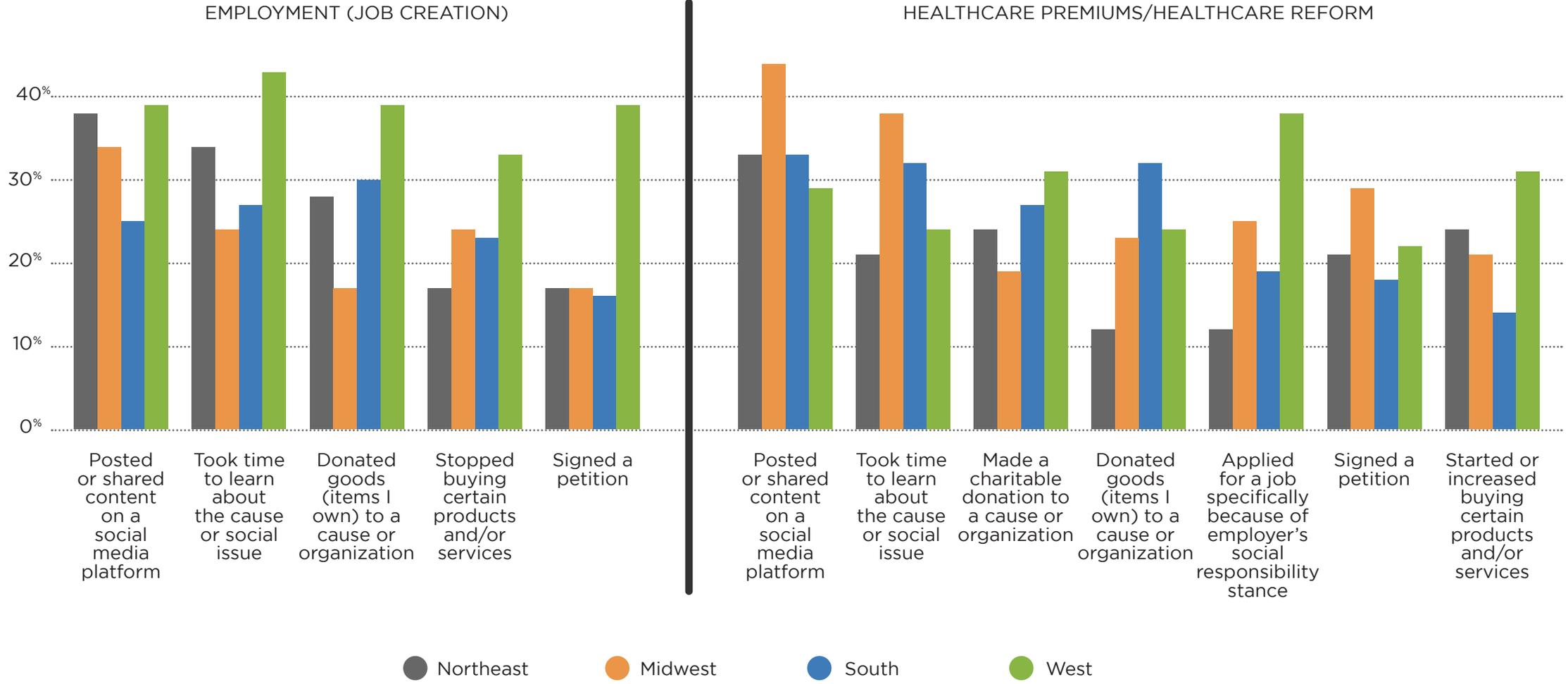
**GEOGRAPHIC CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19**



**GEOGRAPHIC COMPARISON:** Top Actions in the Last 30 Days *(See appendix for all 14 choices offered as potential actions taken.)*



**GEOGRAPHIC COMPARISON (CONT'D):** Top Actions in the Last 30 Days *(See appendix for all 14 choices offered as potential actions taken.)*



# ACTIONS

## THE ISSUES MILLENNIALS ACTED TO SUPPORT WERE NOT THEIR ISSUES OF MOST CONCERN.

As mentioned earlier, millennials were most interested in the issues of COVID, mental health/social services, climate change, employment, healthcare and wages. However, over the last year, millennials acted in support of issues related and unrelated to these areas of interest (see chart).

Influences on the behavior of millennials (and everyone else) are at work every day. Actions taken for particular issues may reflect such influences – for instance, when a friend asks for a donation to a cause. At the same time, opportunities to support issues of interest are not always available or known.

### FOR WHICH SOCIAL ISSUE DID YOU PERFORM AT LEAST 1 ACTION IN THE LAST YEAR?

Civil rights/racial discrimination/social justice	93%
Sexual orientation/gender identity	92%
Veterans/military families	91%
Drugs/alcohol addiction	90%
Environment	90%
Literacy	90%
Poverty/homelessness	90%

### HIGHLIGHTS:

**Sexual orientation/gender identity** – It must be noted that although the research took place in June (Pride Month), the 92% of millennials who said they performed an action related to sexual orientation/gender identity cannot be wholly attributed to timing.

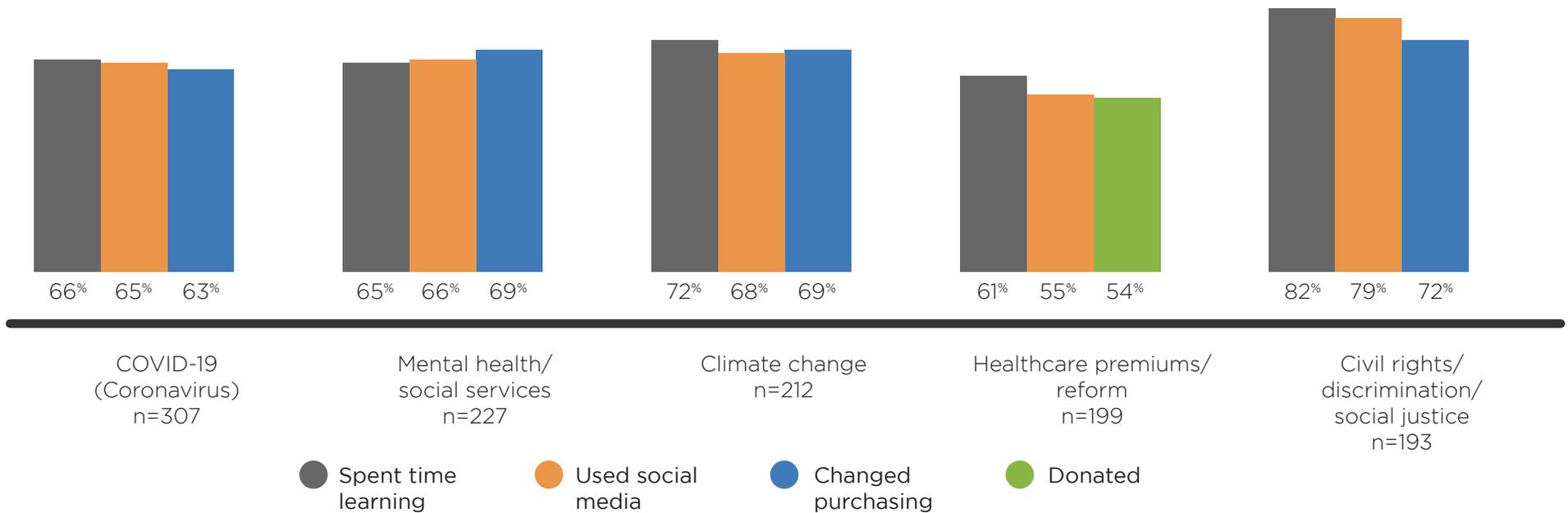


## WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, “SPENT TIME LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE ISSUE” WAS THE NUMBER-ONE ACTION MILLENNIALS TOOK TO SUPPORT SOCIAL ISSUES.

Last year’s Points of Light report warned that “business, organizations and governments must prepare for a new generation that will be highly engaged on issues they care deeply about.” Now, this latest research reinforces that millennials are viewing social issues as personal and are, more than almost any other action, devoting time to increasing their knowledge about those issues. (See chart.) In other words, they are preparing themselves to be fluent consumers of the information causes and companies intend to share.

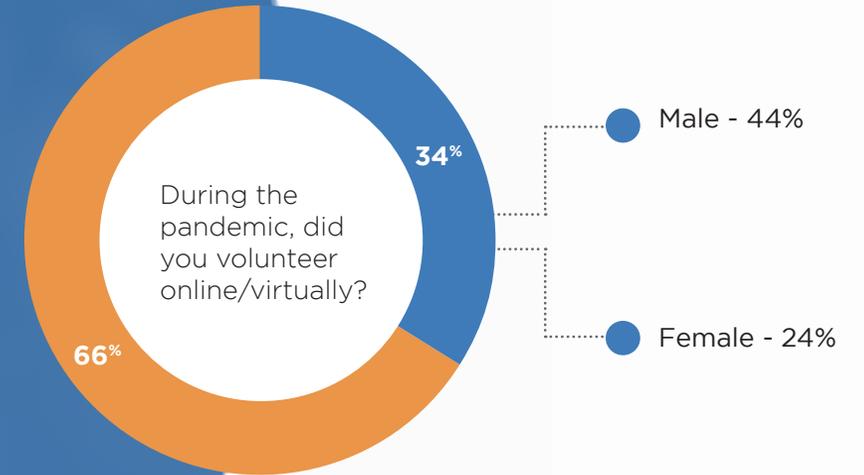
As millennials better understand how their actions can contribute to improving society, companies and nonprofits should help move them to deeper levels of engagement (as discussed in the Civic Circle [video](#) Listen and Learn).

### TOP ACTIONS TAKEN FOR SOCIAL ISSUES OF MOST INTEREST



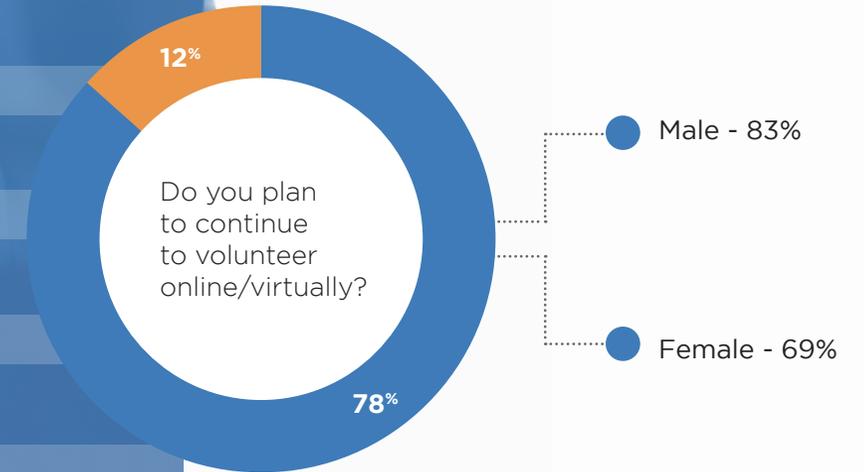
**HIGHLIGHTS:**

**Volunteering seen as the most influential action during the pandemic** – Volunteering was strong during the pandemic and seen as an influential action. A third of millennials volunteered during the pandemic, and most plan to continue after it ends. Black Americans and those in urban settings reported volunteering in numbers well above other groups, as did older respondents and those earning more money. Males were nearly twice as likely as females to have volunteered during the pandemic.



**Profile: THE MILLENNIAL WHO SEEKS MORE KNOWLEDGE ON SOCIAL ISSUES**

<b>Age</b>	35-40
<b>Gender</b>	male
<b>Marital status</b>	married
<b>Education</b>	4-year degree or higher
<b>Employment</b>	works full time
<b>Annual earnings</b>	> \$50,000
<b>Location of residence</b>	South
<b>Church attendance</b>	once a week or more often
<b>Important issues</b>	COVID-19 Mental health/social services



**OF ACTIONS YOU'VE TAKEN IN SUPPORT OF SOCIAL CAUSES, HOW INFLUENTIAL DO YOU THINK EACH HAS BEEN?** (Top responses for “very influential” or “influential” shown)



**UNCERTAINTY KEPT MANY MILLENNIALS FROM TAKING OVERT SOCIAL ISSUE ACTIONS.**

Uncertainty about finances, strangers and whether or not people had been vaccinated were major barriers to civic participation for a quarter of millennials.

**TOP 4 REASONS FOR LACK OF OVERT SOCIAL ISSUE ACTION**

Not financially able	25%
Uncomfortable engaging with people I don't know	23%
Concerned others aren't vaccinated, so uncomfortable engaging with people I don't know	23%
I would rather be doing other things in my free time	23%

**HIGHLIGHTS:**

**Financial concerns** – Asian Americans respondents were the least likely to cite financial concerns, creating a 5%-11% gap between this and other race/ethnicity groups.

**Uncomfortable with people I don't know** – Asian Americans again were the least likely to feel uncomfortable with people they don't know, creating an even larger gap (13%-17%) with other racial groups. In giving this same reason, urban respondents (28%) stood out from suburban (20%) and rural (19%).

**Uncomfortable with the unvaccinated** – Among those uncomfortable around potentially unvaccinated people, a large gap divided urbanites (29%) and rural dwellers (16%).

**Prefer to do other things** – Hispanic and Asian American females were the least likely to say they'd rather be doing other things.



## NEARLY HALF OF MILLENNIALS BELIEVE NOW MORE THAN EVER IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND 2/3 ARE NOW MORE LIKELY TO VOLUNTEER.

If there's a silver lining to the pandemic, this may be it. In determining whether the experiences of the past 18 months had altered millennials' attitudes toward civic engagement, researchers found that 85% now think people should help their community and the world. More younger millennials and females reported having always felt this way anyway, while more older millennials and males credited the pandemic for raising their awareness.

Moreover, 69% of millennials said they are now more likely to volunteer than pre-pandemic. The highest percentages of millennials making this statement were urbanites (79%), ages 35-40 (79%), male (76%) and white (73%).

### Which of the following statements do you agree with the most today?



The pandemic has made me think more than ever before that people like me should try to make a difference. We all should help improve our communities and our country.



I have always thought it was important to get involved in social issues/causes and try to make a difference; the pandemic has not made me think any differently about this.

---

### HIGHLIGHTS:

#### Made me think more than ever before -

- Males (53%) surpassed females (40%) in agreement here.
- Urban (61%) outstripped suburban (42%) and rural (28%).
- The older age cohort (35-40) were 10 percentage points above the other two cohorts (53%).
- Millennials earning \$100,000+ agreed nearly twice as often (61%) as those earning below \$50,000 (36%) and more than the middle earning group (47%).

#### Have always thought this way -

- Younger, female, Hispanic and earning under \$50,000 were the groups most likely in agreement here.
- Females (44%) outpaced males (32%).
- Urbanites were about 15 percentage points below suburban and rural dwellers in agreeing with this statement.



# CORPORATIONS

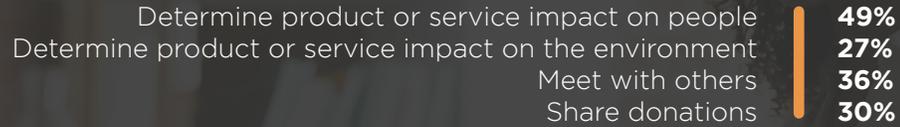
## **COMPANIES SHOULD BE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN SOCIAL ISSUES, AND MILLENNIALS VISIT CORPORATE WEBSITES TO LEARN ABOUT THEIR EFFORTS.**

The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Spring Update: Trust and the COVID-19 Pandemic report found that “68% of U.S. adults agreed companies can take actions that both increase profits and improve conditions in communities where they operate.” The research found that those feelings have not changed. Further, millennials expect companies to know the impact of products and services on people and the environment before offering them to consumers.

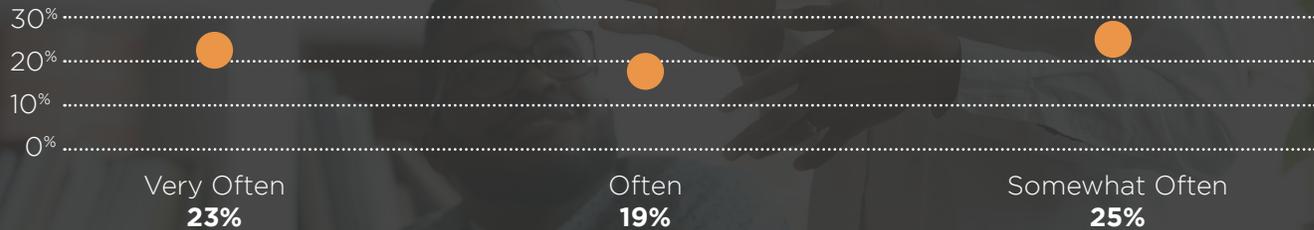
Incorporating questions from the Corporate Social Mind benchmark study (see Methodology), researchers determined that millennials want to know what companies are doing to address racial equality, social justice and anti-discrimination. On average, about two-thirds of millennials visit a company’s website or use a search engine very often, often or somewhat often to find out.



**WHEN A COMPANY CREATES A PRODUCT OR SERVICE, WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU EXPECT THE COMPANY TO DO?**



**HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT A COMPANY'S WEBSITE OR USE ONLINE SEARCH TO LEARN ABOUT A COMPANY'S EFFORTS TO ADDRESS RACIAL EQUALITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION?**



**HIGHLIGHTS:**

**How often do you go online to learn about a company's efforts to address racial equality, social justice and anti-discrimination?**

(Very often, often and somewhat often)

Black American	84%
Those earning \$100,000+	74%
Urban	76%
Male	73%
Hispanic	75%
Rural	55%

**Wide disparities exist when comparing the highest and lowest percentages among respondents who said they check an organization's website very often.**

**Highest % answering "very often"**

Male	31%
Ages 35-40	29%
Black American	30%
Urban	35%
Earn \$100K+	41%

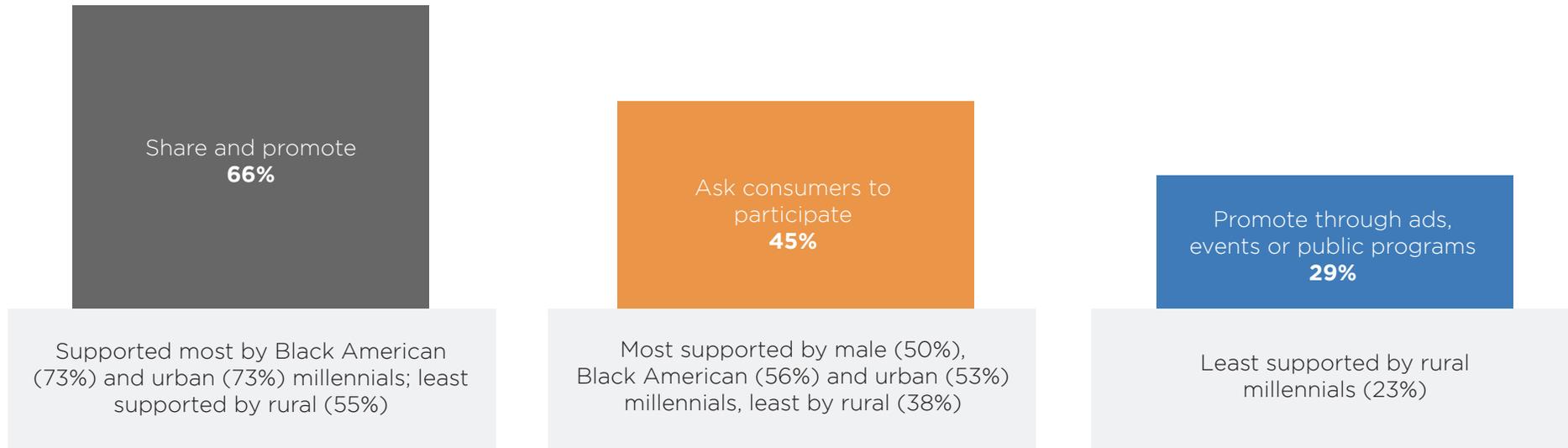
**Lowest % answering "very often"**

Female	15%
Ages 25-29	18%
Asian	13%
Rural	13%
Earn \$50,000-\$99,999	15%

**WHEN A COMPANY CREATES A PRODUCT OR SERVICE, WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU EXPECT THE COMPANY TO DO?**



**BLACK AMERICAN RESPONDENTS PARTICULARLY EXPECTED COMPANIES TO MEET WITH CONSUMERS.**  
**Should companies do any of the following as it relates to social issues?**



# POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

## TOP ISSUES MILLENNIALS WANT THE COUNTRY TO ADDRESS AFTER THE PANDEMIC ARE HEALTHCARE, CRIMINAL/SOCIAL JUSTICE, EDUCATION AND ENVIRONMENT/CLIMATE.

As millennials are viewing civic life from a more personal perspective than ever before, researchers wanted to determine what social issues they believe the government should address. These turned out to be more in line with the political and social issues the country is dealing with currently.

### HIGHLIGHTS:

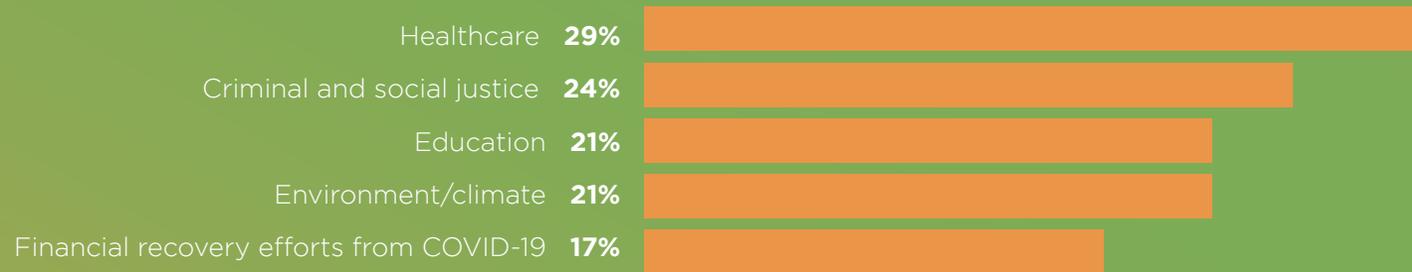
Black American millennials want the country to address criminal and social justice ahead of healthcare.

Rural millennials were half as interested (13%) in the country addressing education as suburban millennials (27%). Rural respondents also reported low interest in the country addressing environment/climate concerns (16%).

Asian American millennials (24%) ranked financial recovery efforts the highest of any racial group.

---

### TOP ISSUES THE COUNTRY MUST ADDRESS POST-PANDEMIC



# CONCLUSION AND CALLS TO ACTION

This data reveals that for millennials today, personal experience influences many aspects of their civic engagement:

- the civic issues they care about,
- the civic issues they will act to support,
- their belief that people should help each other, and
- their desire to make a positive difference in the world.

Uncertainty about finances and whether or not people are vaccinated were barriers to civic participation for a quarter of millennials. Lack of knowledge about an issue was not a barrier, however, and many of the millennials in this study who consider social issues as personal are actively learning more about them.

The Points of Light Civic Circle can guide millennials into civic life. Importantly, though, the Civic Circle also can identify avenues through which nonprofits and companies can reach and recruit millennials.

However – and this is a big caveat – nonprofits and businesses will have to adopt new mindsets about their communications. Instead of sharing the latest need and “Your support helps us do this,” entities must realize they are reaching out to people who feel personally affected and want to learn more. The difference is subtle but powerful: Businesses and nonprofits today need 21st-century partners. Rather than asking millennials to help you reach a goal, you’ll need to ask millennials what they need and how you can work alongside each other to have the biggest impact. **You are the conduit to influence a social issue through the Civic Circle.**



## COMPANIES

In this environment, companies can become vital and trusted information sources for millennial employees and consumers about a social issue. With a business' reach, they can turn this approach into a conduit for vastly increased civic engagement among suppliers, vendors, partners, consumers, advertisers, collaborators and others.

### CALL TO ACTION FOR COMPANIES:

Lean in to the opportunity to become a trusted messenger for information related to a social issue. Accuracy, transparency, consistency and accessibility are keys to building trust. Then, turn those trusted relationships into collaborations through the Civic Circle that serve the personal desires of those looking to address a social issue.

## NONPROFITS

By their nature, nonprofits spend a great deal of time informing the public about their social issues. But how much is centered around moving an individual who is listening and learning to take an overt civic action? Passionate nonprofit employees can easily forget that audiences don't always assign the same relevance to their social issues. Instead, they go straight to their organization's needs, which may not resonate.

### CALL TO ACTION FOR NONPROFITS:

Be clearer about how an issue is personally relevant to the information seeker. Only then should nonprofits start the educational journey to create opportunities to influence change in all the ways illustrated by the Civic Circle.

---

**This research reveals a new, abiding truth:** The time is right for nonprofits, companies and Points of Light to help Americans see how profoundly they can influence social change through the Circle Civic. Every type of entity has an opportunity to be a key driver in building a better-informed public that sees how you and they can create change side by side.

# APPENDIX

**The following is a list of all choices offered as potential actions taken in support of a social issue. Order of responses was randomized for each respondent. Each respondent was permitted to select all that applied.**

- Posted or shared content on a social media platform
- Took time to learn about the cause or social issue
- Made a charitable donation to a cause or organization
- Started or increased buying certain products and/or services
- Donated goods (items I own) to a cause or organization
- Signed a petition
- Donated professional services (that I would normally be paid for given my expertise and skills)
- Stopped buying certain products and/or services
- Volunteered in person with a cause or organization
- Volunteered online or virtually with a cause or organization
- Participated in marches and/or rallies
- Applied for a job with a company or organization specifically because of their social responsibility stance
- Wrote or called my political representative
- Something else





# CIVIC LIFE TODAY: A MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVE



POINTS OF LIGHT

SEPTEMBER 2021