

CIVIC LIFE TODAY: THE STATE OF U.S. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



POINTS OF LIGHT

APRIL 2022

In May 2020, when the first wave of the pandemic was taking hold of the world, Points of Light began [an annual research series](#) to study the state of civic engagement in the United States. We were at the beginning of a shared global experience that we are still feeling the effects of two years later.

Americans have been challenged, but in these challenges, we have seen inspiring stories of individuals acting to support the causes and communities that they care about. If we hope to move forward together, it is this positive energy, this light, that we must capture. To do so, civic engagement must be at the center of our efforts and this report helps us understand more about everyday Americans' attitudes, behaviors and barriers around engagement.

One thing that really stood out to us is that people are taking the time to listen and learn about the issues they care about. When we added the "Listen & Learn" element to [Points of Light's Civic Circle](#), we did so because we believe the basis of every civic action should be rooted in a deep understanding of the issue. Taking action without listening and learning to the affected communities can do deep harm and make your actions less effective.

"Listen and learn" was the top civic action taken in the United States.

Knowing this provides an opportunity for leadership in both the social and corporate sectors.

- For nonprofits, how can you become a resource on an issue and provide more information and education on a cause? This can deepen an individual's connection to the cause and to your organization.
- For companies, people are expecting you to do more. By listening to and learning from the communities in which you do business, you will be better positioned to meet the expectations highlighted in this report.

In spite of the growth we're seeing around listening and learning, there are still barriers or perceived barriers to other forms of civic engagement. Two years ago, Points of Light's research showed that the top barrier was "unsure of how to get involved or where to find opportunities." But the pandemic has further affected which barriers feel most impactful. Today, one of the top perceived barriers is being "unable to financially support social issues or causes in general." People still see financial commitment as necessary to engagement.

Points of Light's Civic Circle helps inspire individuals in the ways they can take action around a cause they care about and can help remove this perceived barrier. It can also inspire them to learn about more ways to take action or pair the actions they're already taking with others for a deeper impact.

Most of all, we're excited to see people continue to take action. I often talk about the power of one. According to this report, 80% of Americans took at least one civic action over the last 30 days, up from 52% in May 2020. That statistic itself is amazing.

As Points of Light releases this report during Global Volunteer Month, we want to celebrate all the people who are doing good in their communities and call upon you to encourage the people in your life to take one action on behalf of a person, cause or community that is important to them.

In Service,



Natalye Paquin, Esq.
President & CEO, Points of Light



INTRODUCTION

From March 2020 to today, America has faced some of its most daunting challenges. The pandemic, racial unrest, a presidential election, an insurrection and each individual Americans' experience of all four have left many social issues insufficiently addressed. Now, with dramatic declines in new COVID cases, hospitalizations and deaths,¹ this research report is crucial to understanding the people who are facing challenges themselves and those who have a deep need to help others face and overcome them.

As Points of Light believes that the most powerful force in the world is the individual who has realized their power to make change happen, this report is intended to reveal a myriad of ways to act effectively – making them easier for individuals to find and organizations to create.

Because right now, according to this new research, the social impact sector is underutilizing the full potential of the everyday individual.

Points of Light created the Civic Circle to help individuals understand that doing good comes in many forms. It is an engagement framework that represents an individual's power to lead, lend support and take action for causes they care about in order to lead a civic life. But what this data shows is that organizations have not yet learned how to appeal to these individuals by using the considerable value they bring to its fullest extent.

Points of Light presents this report to help leaders of organizations apply the thoughts, behaviors and needs of the people looking to join them through the Civic Circle to create opportunities and relationships for satisfying and sustainable change.

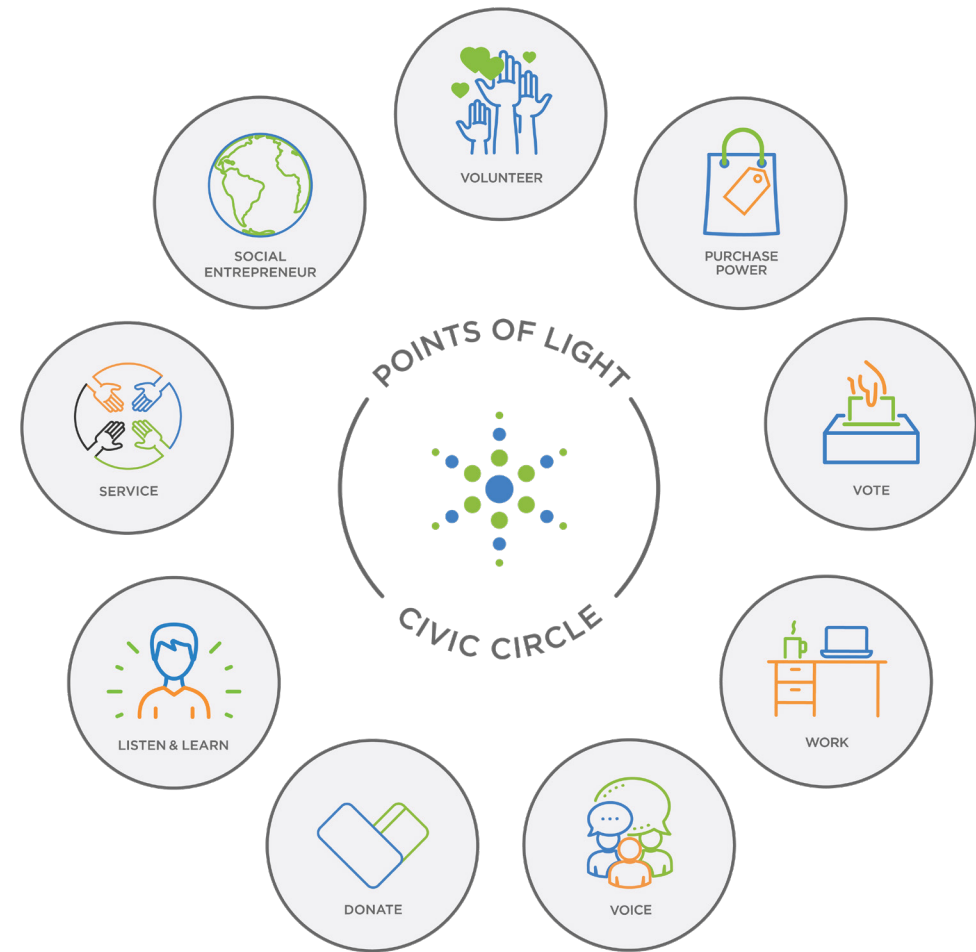
Whether you are a business leader hoping to mobilize employees, a nonprofit or NGO leader hoping to connect individuals to your cause or an individual hoping to support the community you care about, this report and Points of Light's Civic Circle can help inform how to engage a broader cross-section of society in civic action – because we can't be impactful alone.



THE POINTS OF LIGHT CIVIC CIRCLE OFFERS A FRAMEWORK FOR REBUILDING THE COUNTRY.

Points of Light created the Civic Circle to help individuals understand that acting for the betterment of their defined community comes in many forms and to help them connect with opportunities to influence social issues. Concurrently, this framework helps organizations identify pathways to involve the community in their cause.

The Civic Circle is a framework through which individuals can express their desire for change and their stance on social issues. The goal for organizations and companies is to use this framework to create and share opportunities that effect change, thereby allowing every individual to find a way to act – through the organization or company – to manifest meaningful change in the issues they care most about.



METHODOLOGY

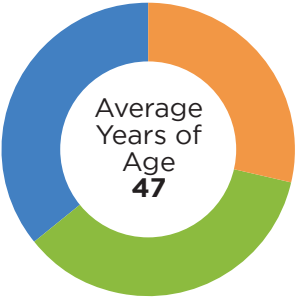
Points of Light commissioned INFLUENCE|SG to design and execute research studies in four countries around the world, including the United States, to identify opportunities to help the world recover and rebuild communities and neighborhoods and address the issues they care about. This is the U.S. report.

The research team took a quantitative approach with a mobile-optimized online survey of a national representative sample of 1,500 adults (ages 18-65) in the U.S. Samples were based on ethnic and demographic composition. The margin of error is +/- 3%. For demographic data-gathering, researchers gave respondents the opportunity to self-identify their gender and race/ethnic identity.

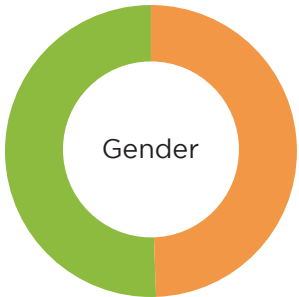
See complete findings, analysis, recommendations and other reports at pointsoflight.org/civic-engagement-research.



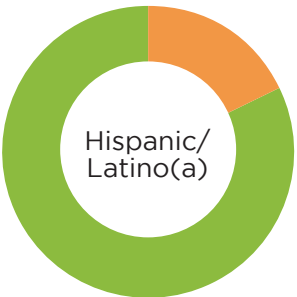
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS



- 29% 18-34
- 36% 35-54
- 36% 55-75



- 49% Male
- 50% Female



- 18% Yes
- 82% No

Area Where Living



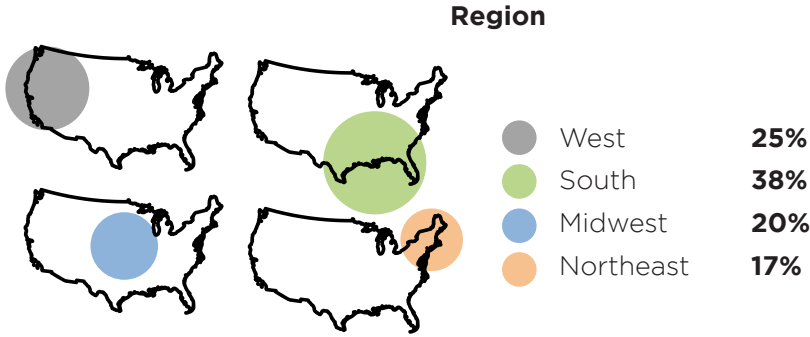
Urban **31%**



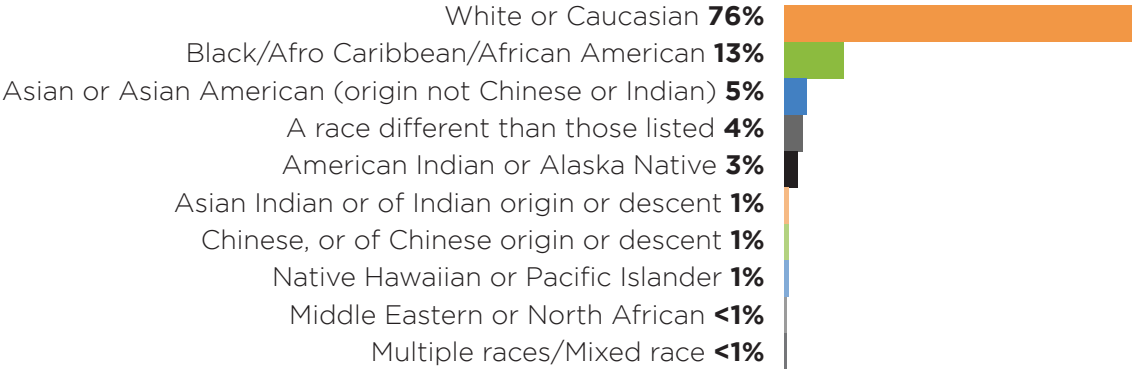
Suburban **35%**



Rural **27%**



Ethnicity



- 37% Less than \$50,000
- 31% Between \$50,000 and \$99,999
- 31% \$100,000 or more



KEY TAKEAWAYS

THE SOCIAL AND PERSONAL ISSUES IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC ARE COMMON AROUND THE COUNTRY.

The same social issues and personal costs have been shared across the United States. At the personal level, healthcare demands attention. On a personal level, respondents chose “the health of others in my community” as the area where they have felt the most impact.

AMERICANS MOST WANT THE COUNTRY TO ADDRESS HEALTHCARE.

Americans ranked healthcare as the most important issue the country must address, followed closely by the related issue of COVID-19.

THREE CIVIC CIRCLE ACTIONS DOMINATED DURING THE PANDEMIC: LISTEN AND LEARN, VOLUNTEER, USE YOUR VOICE.

The most common Civic Circle actions taken to support issues of most interest were using one’s voice (posted or shared content on social media), listen and learn (took time to learn about a cause or social issue) and service (intentionally helped someone else).

VOLUNTEERING HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY THE PANDEMIC.

Volunteering was seen as a less important action to take than voting, working together to rebuild and listening to and learning from others. A third of respondents plan to volunteer more than they did before the pandemic and primarily through virtual opportunities.

EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT ARE HIGH.

Two-thirds of Americans believe companies should be involved in social issues. Consumers expect companies to act directly rather than asking customers to take an action, and they will gauge the selflessness of a company’s efforts by the way it treats its employees.



A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: SHARED EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL ISSUE INTERESTS IN AMERICA

Since President Donald Trump declared a public health emergency on March 13, 2020, American society has endured a pandemic and all the tangible and intangible losses that come with it. Concurrently, the experience of each individual with the pandemic has been influenced by their income, the healthcare immediately available to them and the political party they most affiliate with, all in addition to their age, ability to isolate and underlying health conditions.

Among those affected are the people who want to tackle their country's greatest challenges and those who organizations need to nudge into engagement. Thus, we must take stock of where we are so we can take the best steps forward.

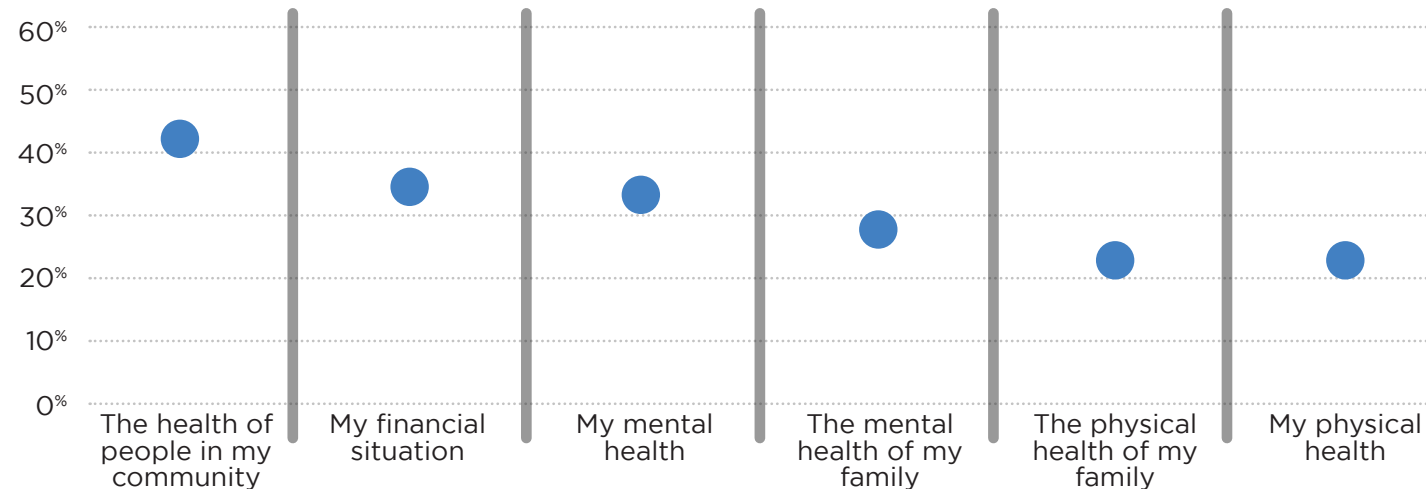


THE SOCIAL AND PERSONAL ISSUES IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC ARE COMMON AROUND THE COUNTRY.

Americans have lived through a shared experience, but one in which their interactions within it have been deeply, even poignantly, personal.

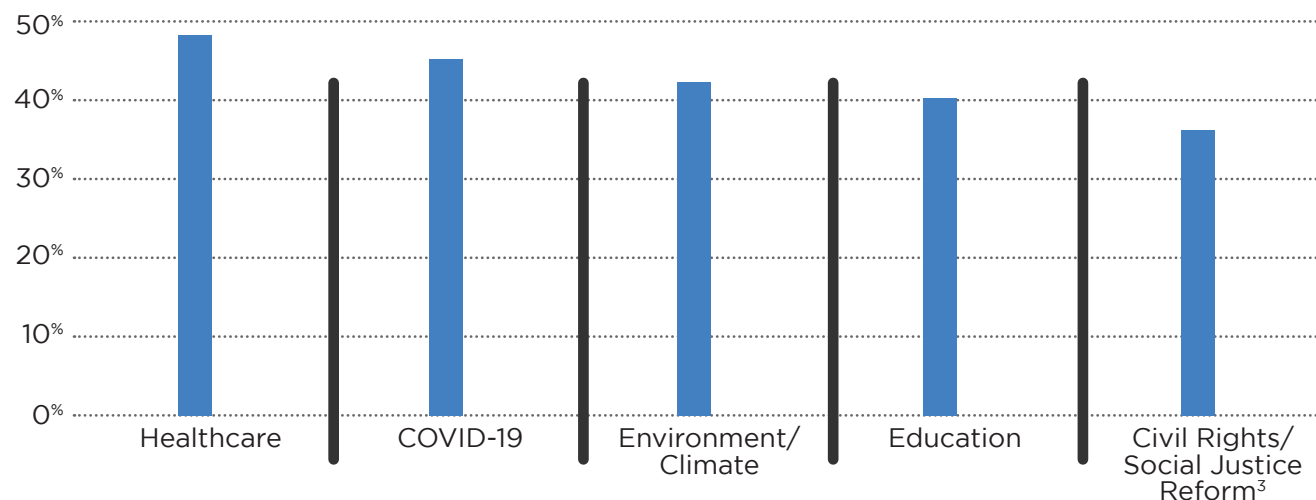
At the personal level, health remains the area of biggest impact. More than 40% said the biggest impact they saw from COVID-19 was on the health of those around them – not surprising in light of the country’s 846,012 COVID-related deaths as of December 31, 2021² – and 33% on their own mental health.

Biggest Impact of the Pandemic (Top Responses)



Similarly, nearly half of respondents chose healthcare as their top cause of interest.

Top 5 Causes of Interest (After Grouping by Similarity)



2. CDC. National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved 9 March 2022 from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/mortality-overview.htm>.

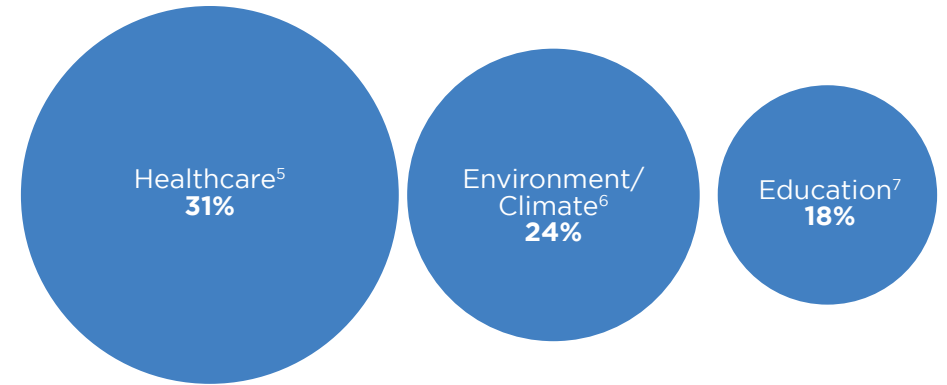
3. Includes: Civil rights/racial discrimination/social justice. Criminal justice reform. Police reform.



AMERICANS MOST WANT THE COUNTRY TO ADDRESS HEALTHCARE

At the national level, respondents think healthcare is the number-one issue the country must address post-pandemic. As Dr. James L. Madara of the American Medical Association said in July 2020, “To be clear, COVID-19 didn’t create the problems in our health system. It revealed them in a way that can no longer be ignored.”⁴ This statement seems to be supported by the emphasis respondents placed on health.

Top 3 Issues the Country Must Address



THREE CIVIC CIRCLE ACTIONS DOMINATED DURING THE PANDEMIC: LISTEN AND LEARN, VOLUNTEER, USING YOUR VOICE.

Over the last 30 days, three Civic Circle actions dominated how respondents supported the issues they were most interested in. They (i) influenced one’s network through social media, advocacy or other form of expression (**using your voice**), (ii) took time to learn about a cause or social issue (**listen and learn**) and (iii) intentionally helped someone else (**volunteer**).



Taking time to learn about an issue (any issue) has continued to be the main action throughout the pandemic. Close to half (46%) of respondents said the most important action to take since the pandemic to support a social issue was to learn more about it.

This focus on learning begs the question: When respondents seek to learn about an issue, are they turning to nonprofits, NGOs and causes for information – and are they receiving the information they need?



Intentionally helping someone else was cited as the second-most important action to take, and for two of the top five social issues of interest (poverty/homelessness and mental health/social services), this action was the one taken by the most respondents. (See “Top 5 Causes of Interest and Associated Civic Circle Actions – Last 30 Days” below.)



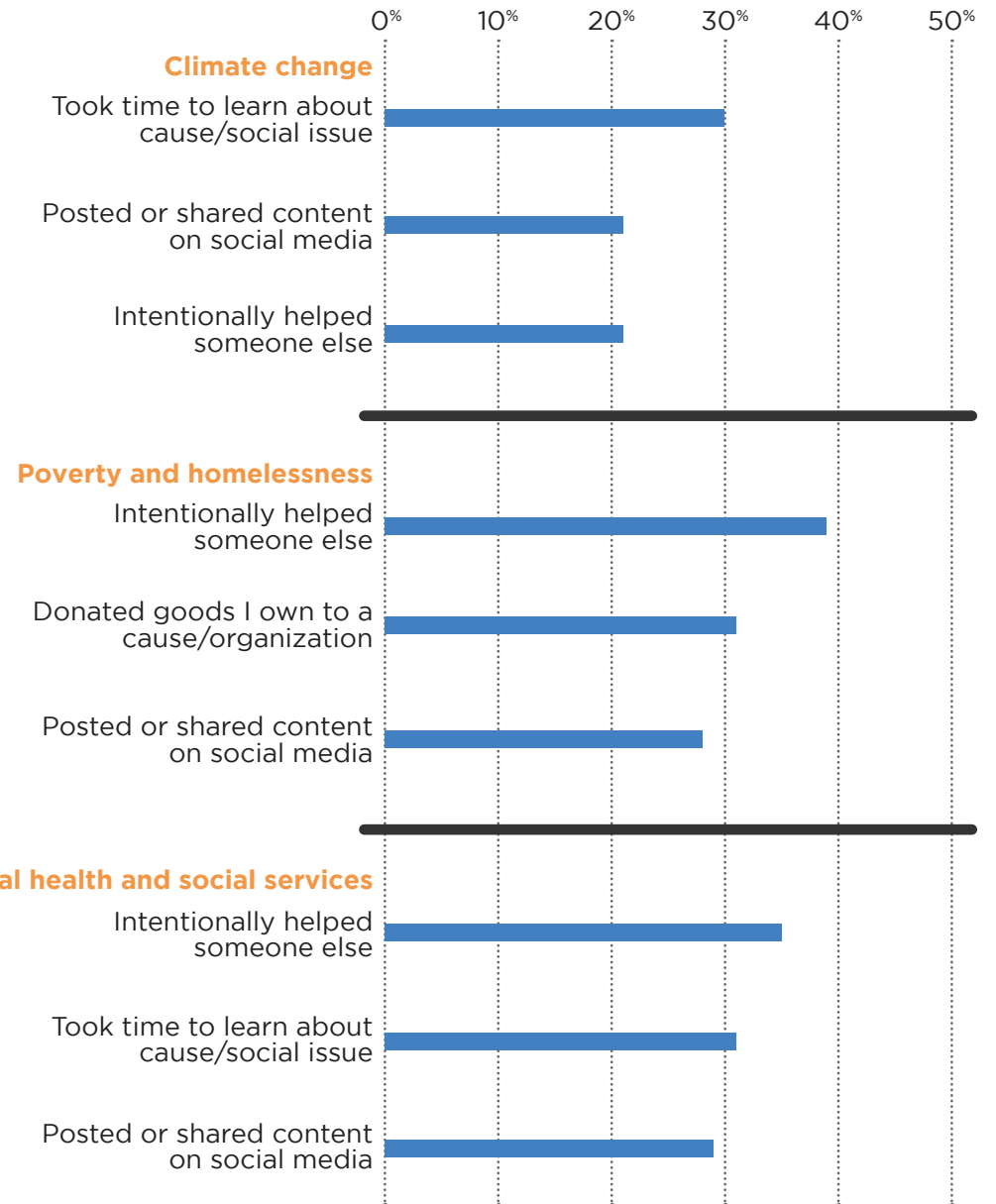
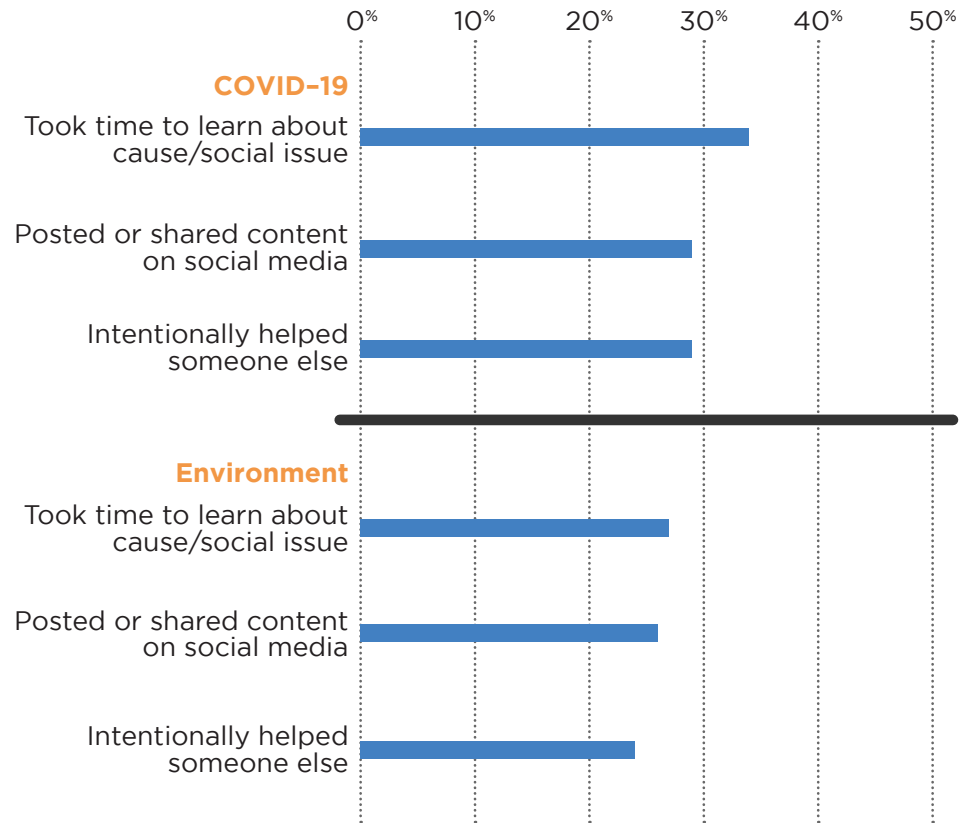
40% of respondents said they posted or shared content on a social media platform, thereby making their voices heard. This was an especially popular tactic for supporting COVID-19 awareness.



Actions Taken in Support of Any Issue/Cause — Last 30 Days

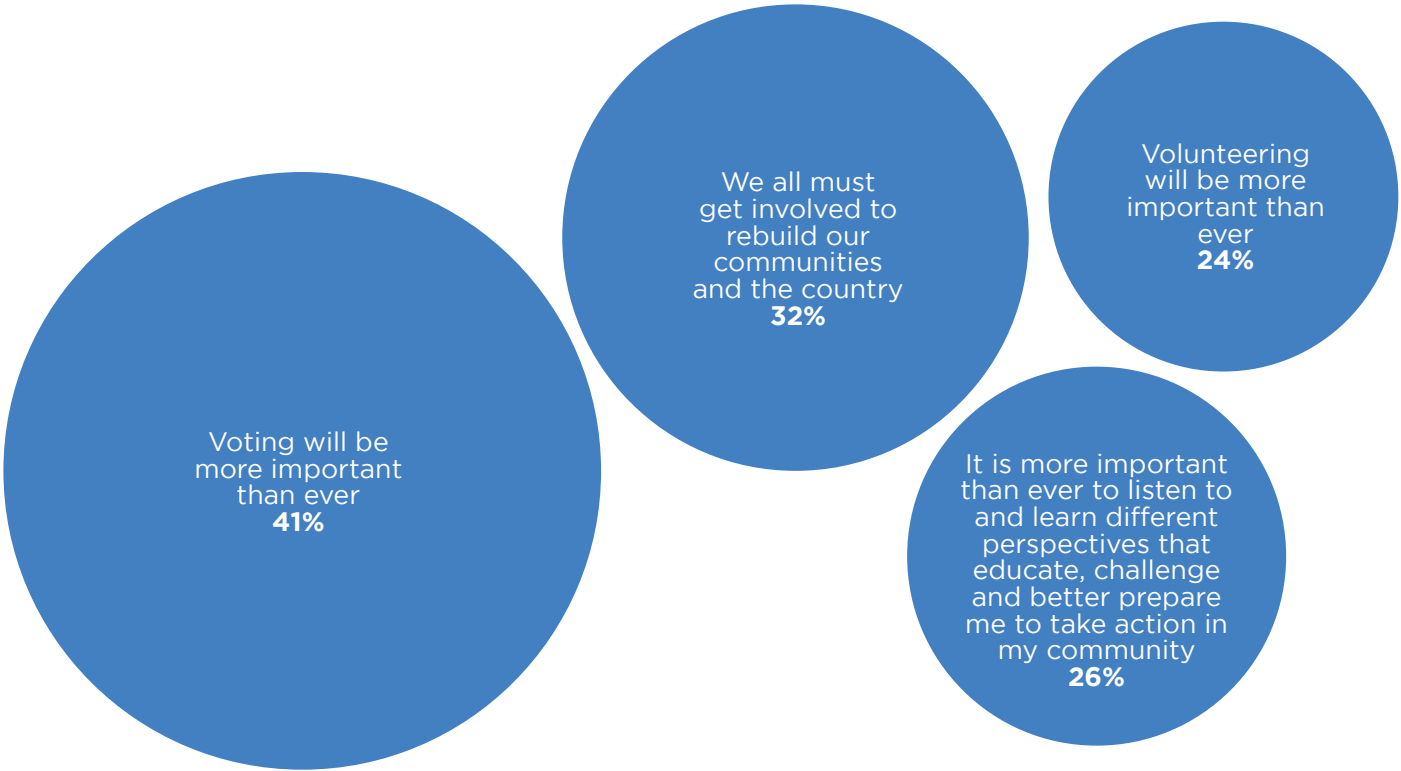


Top 5 Causes of Interest and Associated Civic Circle Actions – Last 30 Days

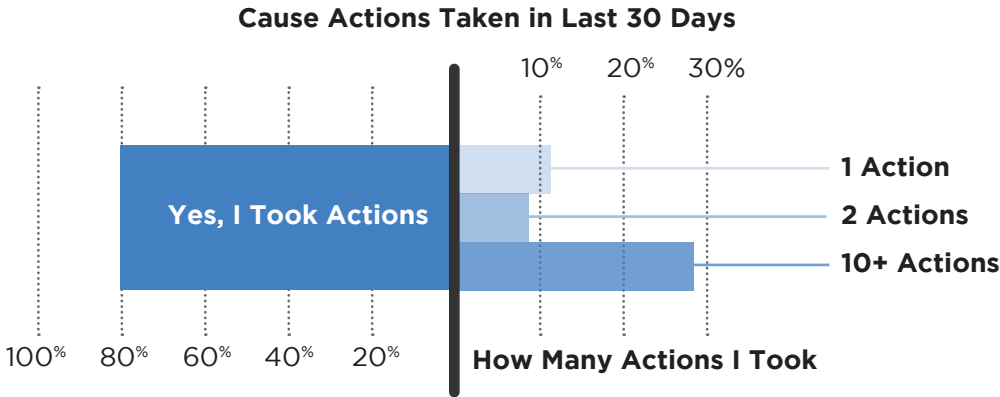


Respondents ranked another Civic Circle action, voting, as the most important activity they could take to support social issue change, which may speak to the political atmosphere around the pandemic in this country. Columbia University political journalism professor Thomas B. Edsall called COVID “the almost ideal polarizing crisis,”⁸ while Vanderbilt University quoted a former official as noting, “Some Americans feel prevented from ... seeking good information because of how politicized the whole issue has become.”⁹

Most Important Activities Since the Pandemic (Top Responses)



Researchers also found that when respondents acted in support of a social issue, more of them tended to take 10 or more actions than just one or two.

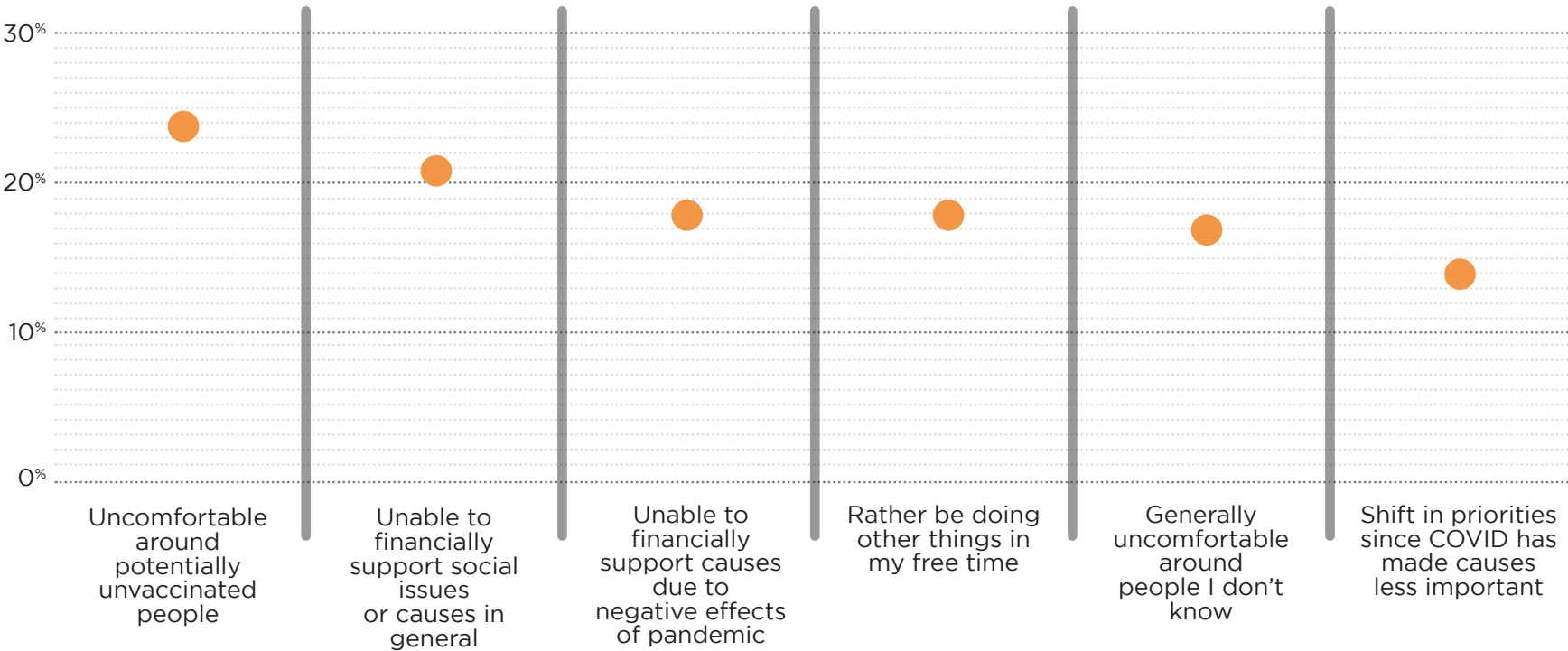


8. *The New York Times*. (26 January 2022). *Opinion: America Has Split, and It's Now in 'Very Dangerous Territory.'* Retrieved 28 February 2022 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/opinion/covid-biden-trump-polarization.html>.
9. *Vanderbilt University News*. (20 August 2021). *Political and medical trust issues: Expert panel debates why some Americans doubt the COVID vaccine.* Vanderbilt University. Retrieved 28 February 2022 from <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2021/08/20/political-and-medical-trust-issues-expert-panel-debates-why-some-americans-doubt-the-covid-vaccine/>.

The top reason for not supporting social issues (uncomfortable around the unvaccinated) may speak to a lingering fear of COVID. Virtual volunteer opportunities can help address these concerns by allowing people to participate from the safety of their homes.

Most notable, though, is that two of the top three reasons for lack of involvement in social issues involve the inability to financially support causes. This reflects the public's continued perception that being involved with a cause, nonprofit or NGO means giving money. It means that organizations are still underutilizing the Civic Circle and have much work to do in educating current and potential audiences about the many ways they can influence change.

Top Reasons for Lack of Social Issue Involvement

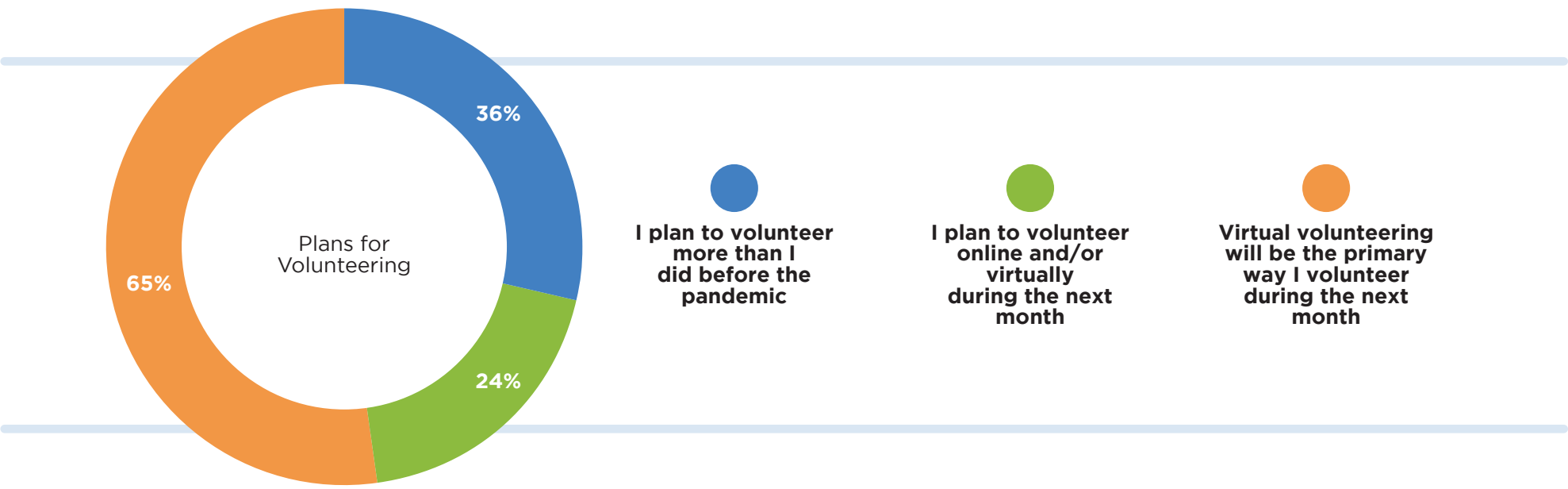


VOLUNTEERING HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY THE PANDEMIC.

As mentioned earlier, the pandemic has been a divisive issue politically, which may be the reason that the action of volunteering is lower on the list of what respondents believe are the most important actions to take today. The 24% of respondents who said volunteering was most important is much lower than the 41% who said the most important act was to vote. (See “Most Important Activities Since the Pandemic (Top Responses)” chart above.)

Nevertheless, a third of respondents do plan to volunteer more than they did before the pandemic. Of those, more than two-thirds intend to do so primarily via virtual opportunities. The physical, mental and financial tolls of COVID-19 may have played a role in the decision to seek virtual opportunities, as might increased virtual offerings by causes..

Researchers found that the people who volunteered within the prior 30 days are the same people who said they plan to volunteer within the next 30 days.



EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT ARE HIGH.

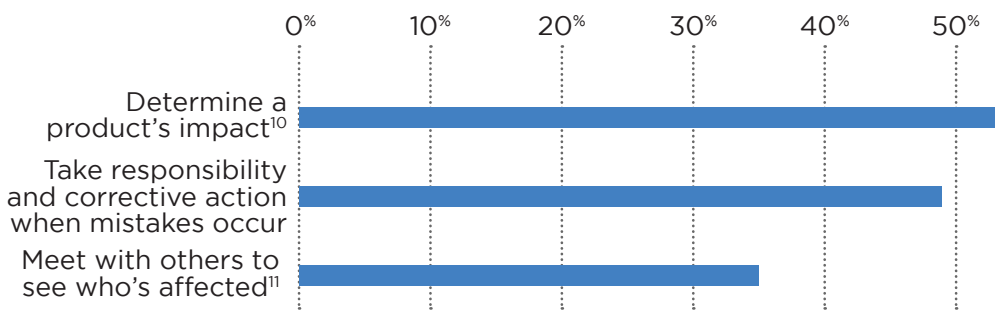
Points of Light has often shared research to help companies assume a stronger role in addressing societal challenges through the Civic Circle, participating for humanitarian reasons and to fulfill their roles in society but also because their customers expect it. Yet, never have expectations of companies been stronger than they are now: Two-thirds of Americans believe companies should do something related to a social issue.

Yes, a company should do something related to a social issue



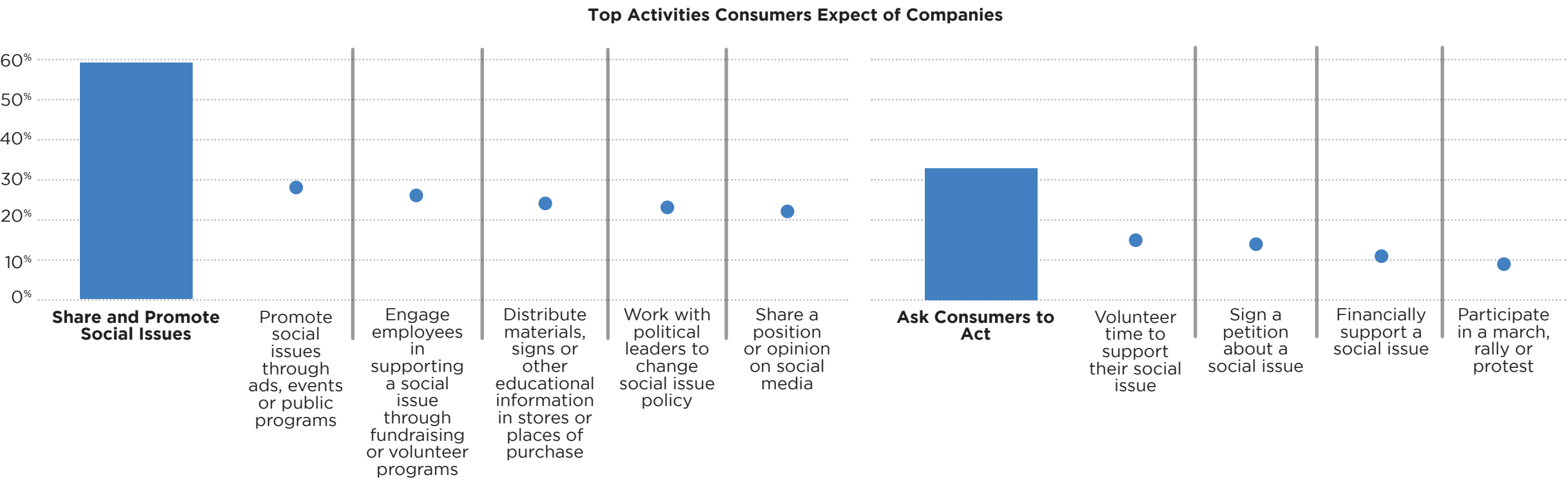
Half of respondents said companies should determine a product’s impact before implementing it and, if mistakes do occur, be accountable and move immediately to correct them.

Top 3 Actions Consumers Expect Companies to Perform



10. Includes: Determine whether the product or service will impact the environment. Study how the product or service will positively or negatively affect the local workforce. Study how the product or service will impact employees.
11. Includes: Meet with consumers like you to determine whether their product or service will affect you or your family. Meet with local leaders to determine how product/service will affect the local neighborhood, city and/or state of residence.

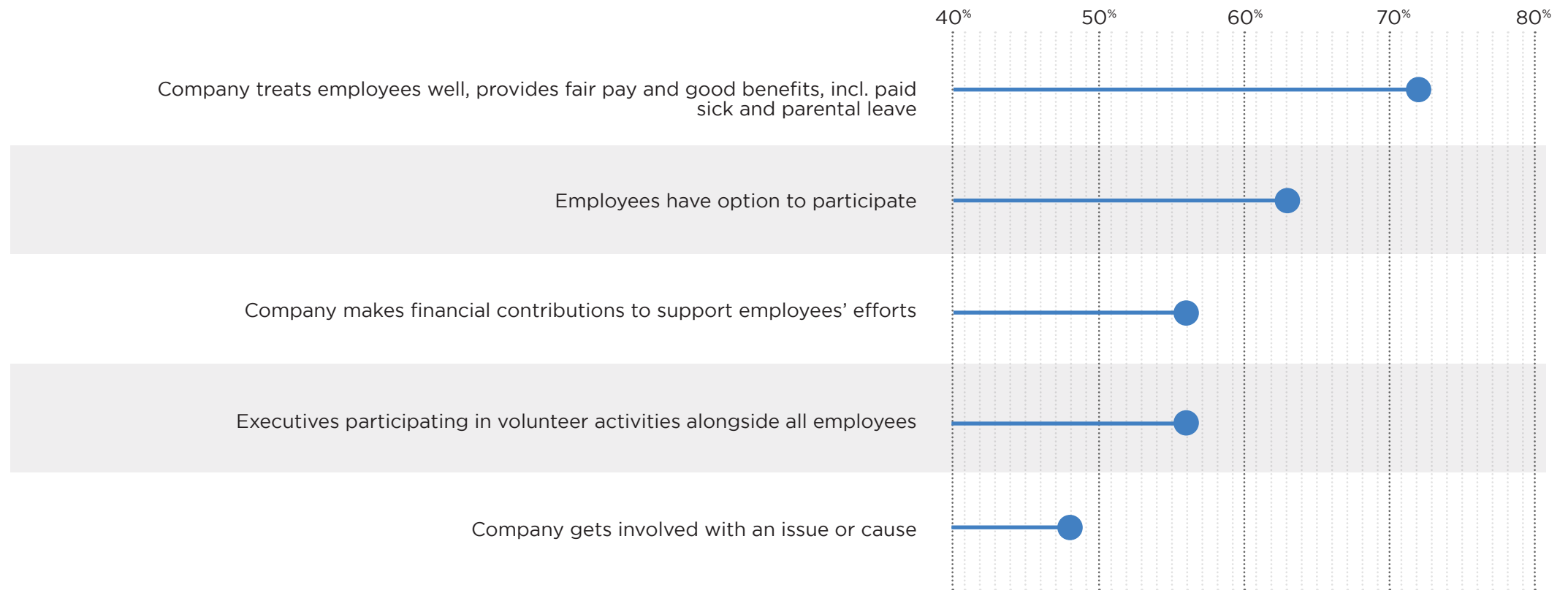
Whatever action companies choose, consumers think it should be an overt action on their part, not simply a request for their customers to act.



Whatever the action, how a company treats its employees carries more weight with consumers than the company's action itself. Consumers will trust that a company is acting in a genuinely selfless manner only if its employees get fair pay, good benefits and the choice of whether or not to take part in corporate social issue activities.

The Civic Circle can guide companies away from missteps in the planning, implementation and evaluation of social issue initiatives.

Top Activities That Help Consumers Trust a Company's Social Issue Efforts



CONCLUSION

As Americans reconcile with lives altered by the pandemic and recovery, companies, nonprofits, NGOs and individuals will all have a say in how we rebuild society. The pathways and the spirit in which Americans engage with each other and the causes they care about will matter more than ever. What can be done to ensure Americans are moving forward together?

For companies:

Consumer expectations for companies to participate in making change happen have existed for several years, but they have increased significantly since the pandemic. This report is a call for companies to seize an opportunity: the chance to influence and effect meaningful change by staying focused on their own messages, actions, policies and impact. While many of these are internal-facing, they lend credibility to a company's reputation and social issue actions.

As evidenced by the data, any company can do more than it has done for social issues as an organization before reaching out to consumers.

For nonprofits, NGOs and causes:

As shown through this report, people who want to do good or create change are gravitating toward nontraditional forms of engagement. This includes educating oneself more deeply on social issues, using one's voice to share support for social issues or organizations, and helping each other in more direct ways than through organizations.

Since the vast majority of individuals are actively learning more about the issues they care about, nonprofits, NGOs and causes must use the time they have to educate their potential constituents about why their issue deserves attention. These organizations should apply the Civic Circle and, as they do so, create new pathways for entry into participation for the many impassioned Americans who want to help their community and country rebound.

For individuals:

Americans are learning how to live with a continuous cycle of disruption from any side. Given this reality, individuals shouldn't wait to assess and find their own level of comfort with being involved in causes. Those who want to help should first take time to assess the needs of their community, the causes they care about and their own well-being and readiness to engage in today's world.

Americans feel the passion and strong viewpoints of many family, friends, colleagues and community members – people who need help translating their energy into meaningful action for the change they seek. The research tells us that those already engaged are the ones most likely to continue to be so. These engaged individuals should consider who they could encourage to join them, as people who want change are ready to be nudged. Using the Civic Circle to nudge them in new directions can help them realize their power.





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