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"There are issues that I care about"

What drives civically engaged student voters

Pre- and post-election analysis of Arizona State University student voting behavior and attitudes

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Voting rates among Arizona State University (ASU) students have increased between regular term and midterm elections since 2012. Reports show that between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, ASU student voting rates increased from 47.8% to 58.7%.[1] Perhaps more impressively, the 2018 midterm election showed a large upward swing in voter turnout among ASU students compared to 2014, increasing from 19.0% to 41.5%.[2] In both cases, the ASU voting rate sat above the turnout rate for all higher education institutions as a whole (50.4% and 39.1%, respectively).

That being said, young people tend to vote at lower rates than older individuals, and this is especially true in the United States.[3] ASU’s student population is no exception. National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) reports show a positive correlation between age and voting rate. Even dramatic changes across the population, such as the differences between the 2014 and 2018 midterm voter turnout, still demonstrate this discrepancy between voters by age group.[4]

There are multiple proposed reasons why an age gap in voting exists. Wattenberg theorized that young people do not vote because they pay less attention to political news and overall have less interest in politics.[5] Alternatively, some researchers have found that young people intend to vote at the same rates as adults but are much more likely to be derailed by barriers in the voting process, such as being unsure what documentation is needed to vote and uncertainty about how to fill out a ballot.[6] Similarly, Plutzer proposed a developmental framework for turnout, suggesting that first-time voters face an aggregate of hurdles that older voters have had time to overcome slowly, such as navigating the registration process, locating a polling place, and understanding party differences and key issues.[7] A third theory says that young voters are civically active but tend to engage differently in the political atmosphere. For example, young people tend to perceive elections as infrequent and ineffective tools for influencing policy and are more interested in being civically engaged through activities like volunteering, being active in one’s community, petitioning, protesting, and participating in political consumerism.[8]

Efforts to increase voting among young adults have been investigated and found to have varying effectiveness. Ulbig & Waggener found that providing on-campus registration opportunities enhanced voter turnout in the 2008 election.[9] Moreover, providing easily accessible informational brochures to interested students also increased turnout; however, little impact was seen for "younger, less-engaged" students. While nonpartisan campaigns like "Get Out the Vote" can be effective in changing the voting behavior of young people, research shows that the method of outreach matters (e.g., door to door canvassing versus prerecorded phone calls), with more personal interactions between the campaign and potential voters found to be more effective. The feasibility and practicality of more personal approaches, though, tend to wane with larger-scale efforts.[10] Furthermore, GOTV campaigns may exacerbate disparities in the participation gap by encouraging those who are already likely to vote rather than breaking down barriers for those who are less likely to vote.[11] Additional work is needed to understand which approaches are best for harder-to-reach populations.

The current study seeks to better understand young voters' behavior by examining ASU students' motivations and attitudes around voting. Additionally, the study examines where young student voters get information related to voting processes and ballot issues in order to propose next steps and action efforts to increase voting rates and civic engagement among ASU students. This study builds off previous work by the Ed Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service, which identified key barriers to voting among ASU students, such as lack of knowledge about voting processes, lack of information about candidates, and lack of accessibility to the polls as a result of schedule and time conflicts.

Methods

The Ed Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service and the Morrison Institute for Public Policy collaborated to conduct this study during the fall 2020 semester. The primary goal was to explore what motivates students to vote, how they voted in the 2020 general election, and what factors influenced those behaviors, among other civic engagement activities. These topics were explored by conducting two surveys, one in October 2020, before the general election, and one in November 2020, after the general election. The surveys targeted ASU college students, ages 18-25, who were eligible to vote in the United States.

For the pre-election survey, participants were recruited through ASU student organization leadership via email. Information regarding participation was distributed to the leaders of 350 randomly selected student organizations registered with the university. Organizations represented a wide array of topical interests and majors as well as ASU campuses. Organization leaders were asked to forward the study information and survey link to their members. Two reminder emails about the study were distributed in an attempt to increase response rates. Additionally, recruitment was facilitated through residential life at ASU. The primary investigator contacted the assistant director of residential life, who sent the study recruitment information to residence hall directors and staff across all four campuses.

Participants who completed the pre-election survey and provided their contact information as requested were invited via email to participate in the post-election survey. Recruitment materials emphasized that students who did not vote were still eligible to participate. Qualtrics software was used to conduct both surveys.

To incentivize participation, respondents had the opportunity to enter into a random drawing to win one of 20 $50 Amazon gift cards. Participants received one submission into the drawing for completing the pre-survey and three additional submissions for completing the post-survey. Once both surveys were closed, 20 participants were randomly selected from the entire drawing pool and sent a gift card.

Results

One hundred and forty-six individuals initiated the pre-election survey (the “pre-survey”). Twenty-seven individuals did not meet eligibility criteria (see below), and therefore, were not permitted to complete the survey, leaving 119 participants. An additional three participants were removed for only including their age and no other data, resulting in a total sample of 116 (referred to as the “full sample” throughout). Only participants who completed the pre-survey and provided their email at the end were invited to participate in the post-election survey (the “post-survey”). Seventy-two individuals participated in the post-survey (61% of the full sample) and comprised the analytic, or comparative, sample. Sample sizes may vary throughout this report due to participants skipping questions or only completing part of the pre- or post-survey.[12]

Eligibility

On the pre-survey, participants were asked to report their age and if they were eligible to vote in the United States. Only participants signifying that they were 18–25 years old and eligible to vote qualified to participate in the survey. Most participants were between the ages of 18–21 years in both the analytic (97.2%) and full (93%) samples.

Table 1: Age of participants

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
18	14	19.4%	25	21.6%
19	13	18.1%	22	19.0%
20	23	31.9%	31	26.7%
21	20	27.8%	30	25.9%
22	2	2.8%	4	3.4%
23	0	0.0%	2	1.7%
24	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
25	0	0.0%	2	1.7%
Total	72	100.0%	116	100.0%

Participants were also asked about their registration status. Similarly, the vast majority of participants in both the analytic and full samples (95-96%) were registered to vote in Arizona or another state at the time of the pre-survey (Table 2). These percentages are high compared to the total percentage of ASU students registered to vote as of the 2018 primaries (69.9%).[13] All participants reported the same registration status on the post-survey except one participant who changed from “No, I am not registered” to “I do not know.”

Table 2: Registration status

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes, in Arizona	52	72.2%	78	67.2%
Yes, in another state	17	23.6%	32	27.6%
No, I am not registered	3	4.2%	3	2.6%
I do not know	0	0.0%	3	2.6%
Total	72	100.0%	116	100.0%

Demographic Information

Demographic information for the full and analytic samples is provided below. Where available, the study samples are compared to ASU demographic data for all students from the four Phoenix metropolitan campuses in fall 2019 (*n* = 74,878).[14] Enrollment and demographic data were not available for fall 2020 at the time of this report.

Table 3: Gender identity of participants

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Female	53	73.6%	81	69.8%
Male	17	23.6%	33	28.4%
Gender Nonconforming	1	1.4%	1	0.9%
Multiple Identities	1	1.4%	1	0.9%
Total	72	100.0%	116	100.0%

*Note. The one participant who selected multiple identities identified as "Female" and "Gender Nonconforming."

In both study samples, most participants identified as female (Table 3). This gender balance is counter to ASU demographic information, where a slight majority of the student population (52%) is reported as male. As seen in Table 4, most participants in both samples identified as heterosexual. College-wide data on sexual orientation was not available.

Table 4: Sexual orientation of participants

Do you identify as anything other than cisgender and heterosexual?	Analytic Sample (*n*=72)			Full Sample (*n*=116)		
	Yes	No	Prefer not to answer	Yes	No	Prefer not to answer
	21 (29.2%)	49 (68.1%)	2 (2.8%)	33 (8.4%)	80 (69.0%)	3 (2.6%)

With regard to racial identity, the majority of participants in both study samples identified as "White," followed by participants who identified as "Asian" (Table 5). These groups were overrepresented when compared to percentages in the overall ASU student body. All other racial groups were underrepresented, except for those who identified as multiracial.

Table 5: Racial identity of participants

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample		ASU Student Population
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1.6%
Asian	12	16.7%	21	18.1%	9.5%
Black or African American	1	1.4%	2	1.7%	5.2%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.3%
White	51	70.8%	76	65.5%	60.4%
Not listed (please specify)[15]	1	1.4%	2	1.7%	Not reported
Multiracial	4	5.6%	9	7.8%	5.6%
Prefer not to answer	3	4.2%	5	4.3%	Not reported
Did not respond	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	Not reported
Total	72	100.0%	116	100.0%	100.0%

*Note. The ASU demographic questionnaire for race included "Hispanic/Latino" as a response option; percentages in this table for the ASU student population were adjusted to exclude this category for congruence with the current survey questionnaire.

Approximately 21% of the analytic sample and roughly 22% of the full sample identified as "Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin" (Table 6). These percentages are comparable, yet slightly below the total percentage of Hispanics/Latinos at ASU in fall 2019 (22.9%). Of note, the ASU demographic questionnaire asked about "Race/Ethnicity" and included "Hispanic/Latino" as a response option; therefore, it is possible that some Hispanic/Latino students who identify as more than one racial/ethnic category, including Hispanic/Latino, are not captured in the overall percentage due to being classified as multiracial.

Table 6: Ethnic identity of participants

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin?	Analytic Sample (n = 72)			Full Sample (n = 116)		
	Yes	No	Prefer not to answer	Yes	No	Prefer not to answer
	15 (20.8%)	57 (79.2%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (21.6%)	91 (78.4%)	0 (0.0%)

School Information

Participants were also asked about the academic school or college under which their major area(s) of study is/are housed (select all that apply), their year in school, and their living situation.

Table 7: ASU schools and colleges represented in the sample

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample		ASU Student Population
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Percent
W.P. Carey School of Business	7	9.7%	15	12.9%	18.0%
Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts	1	1.4%	3	2.6%	6.9%
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College	3	4.2%	3	2.6%	3.8%
Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering	18	25.0%	30	25.9%	22.5%
School for the Future Innovation in Society	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.2%
College of Health Solutions	4	5.6%	5	4.3%	5.4%
College of Integrative Sciences and Arts	1	1.4%	2	1.7%	4.9%
New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences	4	5.6%	5	4.3%	3.4%
Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication	1	1.4%	4	3.4%	1.3%
Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	1.3%
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences	37	51.4%	49	42.2%	22.0%
Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3.2%
Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions	2	2.8%	5	4.3%	4.4%
School of Sustainability	2	2.8%	2	1.7%	0.6%
Thunderbird School of Global Management	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	0.6%
University College	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	NA
Not listed (describe below)	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.9%
Prefer not to answer	0	0.0%	1	0.9%	NA
Total	80	111.3%	126	108.6%	100.0%

Respondents comprised a diverse pool of ASU students representing 14 colleges/schools in the full sample and 11 colleges/schools in the analytic sample (Table 7). Participants were permitted to select multiple colleges/schools on the survey; therefore, percentages from the study samples in Table 7 exceed 100. Eight participants in the analytic sample selected two schools, and 10 participants in the full sample selected two schools. The majority of the double responses (seven in the analytic sample and eight in the full sample) included the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences as one response option. Four included the School of Engineering across both samples. Compared to 2019 ASU enrollment data, the study samples were generally representative of the student population, with the majority of participants representing the School of Business, the School of Engineering, and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences which, even after accounting for double selection, was the one college that was notably overrepresented.[16] ASU data did not indicate students who were enrolled in more than one college or school.

The highest percentage of participants across both samples were juniors, followed by freshmen and seniors. However, sophomores were also represented. Compared to ASU statistics, juniors were overrepresented in the current study samples and freshmen to a lesser extent. Whereas sophomores and seniors were somewhat underrepresented, and graduate students were greatly underrepresented (which is not surprising given the target age group of 18-25 years old).

Table 8: Participants' year in school

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample		ASU Student Population
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Percent
Freshman	15	20.8%	26	22.4%	16.9%
Sophomore	9	12.5%	18	15.5%	17.8%
Junior	32	44.4%	41	35.3%	20.9%
Senior	14	19.4%	24	20.7%	26.8%
Graduate degree seeking	1	1.4%	6	5.2%	15.8%
Prefer not to answer	1	1.4%	1	0.9%	Not reported
Total	72	100.0%	116	100.0%	98.2%

*Note. ASU demographics reported an additional 1.8% of non-degree-seeking students not included in the total percentage above.

Over half of each sample reported living off campus with friends or family, and a large percentage of participants (analytic = 38%; full = 44%) reported living in the dorms. The percentages for students living in a dorm were higher in the study samples than reported by Residential Life at ASU, which indicated that 11,183 (18.0%) undergraduates were living on campus.[17] This discrepancy is likely a result of the recruitment efforts facilitated through Residential Life.

Table 9: Participants' living situation

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
In a dorm	27	38.0%	50	43.5%
Living off campus with family	23	32.4%	32	27.8%
Living off campus with roommates	19	26.8%	30	26.1%
Living off campus alone	2	2.8%	3	2.6%
Total	71	100.0%	115	100.0%

*Note. One participant did not respond.

Party Affiliation

Participants who indicated that they were registered to vote were asked to report their party affiliation on the pre- and post-survey. Participants from the full sample were primarily Democrats (54%) or Independents (31%).

Table 10: Party affiliation (full sample)

	Frequency	Percent
Democrat	59	53.6%
Republican	12	10.9%
Independent	34	30.9%
Other	5	4.5%
Total	110	100.0%

*Note. Six participants did not indicate being registered to vote and were not asked to respond to this question.

Results were very similar with the analytic sample, with the majority of participants identifying as Democrats (52%) or Independents (35%). Notably, four participants (6%) reported changes in party affiliation from pre- to post-survey. Two participants changed from “Independent” to “Democrat,” one participant changed from “Republican” to “Independent,” and one participant changed from “Other” to “Republican.”

Table 11: Pre- and post-survey political party affiliation (analytic sample)

	Pre		Post	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Democrat	34	49.3%	36	52.2%
Republican	6	8.7%	6	8.7%
Independent	25	36.2%	24	34.8%
Other	4	5.8%	3	4.3%
Total	69	100.0%	69	100.0%

*Note. Three participants did not indicate being registered to vote and were not asked to respond to this question.

Intention to Vote

On the pre-survey, participants who were registered to vote were asked to rate the likelihood that they would vote in the general election by responding to the question, “I plan to vote in the November 3, 2020 election” on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” Most participants across both the analytic (94%) and full (95%) sample agreed or strongly agreed that they planned to vote.

Table 12: Participants’ intention to vote on pre-survey

	Analytic Sample		Full Sample	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	3	4.3%	4	3.6%
Disagree	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Neutral	1	1.4%	1	0.9%
Agree	8	11.6%	12	10.9%
Strongly agree	57	82.6%	93	84.5%
Total	69	100.0%	110	100.0%

*Note. Three participants from the analytic sample and six participants from the full sample did not indicate being registered to vote and were not asked to respond to this question.

Notably, all four participants from the analytic sample who were neutral or strongly disagreed ended up voting in the election. In fact, only one participant did not vote. In a separate open-ended question later in the post-survey, this participant noted why they did not vote, commenting, “I did not receive my mail-in ballot, because my father stole it I did not have time to vote in person.”

Voting Method

On the pre-survey, participants who were registered and planning to vote (*n* = 65) were asked, "How do you plan to vote in the November 3, 2020, general election?" On the post-survey, participants who indicated that they were registered to vote (*n* = 69) were asked how they actually voted. A large majority of participants voted by mail (74%). The remaining participants voted in person at a campus voting center (13%), in person at a voting center off campus (12%), or did not vote (1%).

Table 13: Voting method (analytic sample)

	Pre		Post	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
In person at a campus voting center	4	6.2%	9	13.0%
In person at an off-campus voting center	6	9.2%	8	11.6%
By mail	35	53.8%	51	73.9%
I already voted early	18	27.7%	NA	NA
I am not sure	2	3.1%	NA	NA
I did not vote	NA	NA	1	1.4%
Total	65	100.0%	69	100.0%

Of the 18 participants who indicated voting early on the pre-survey, 13 reported voting early by mail, three reported voting in person at a polling station off campus, and two reported voting in person at a polling station on campus on the post-survey. Thirty-two of the 35 participants who indicated that they planned to vote by mail on the pre-survey reported doing so on the post-survey. Of the three remaining participants, one ended up voting in person at a polling station on campus, one voted in person at a polling station off campus, and one did not vote. Two participants who planned to vote in person off campus voted by mail, and one participant who planned to vote by mail voted in person on campus. Of the four participants on the pre-survey who indicated that they did not intend to vote, two reported voting by mail, one voted in person on campus, and one voted in person off campus. Finally, two participants who did not respond on the pre-survey and one participant who reported being unsure indicated voting by mail on the post-survey.

Voting with Others

On the pre-survey, participants were asked how likely they were to go to the polls or fill out a mail-in ballot with at least one other person. On the post-survey, participants were asked if they went to the polls with at least one other person and, in a separate question, if they filled out their mail-in ballot with at least one other person. As seen in Table 14, all respondents on the pre-survey who were "Unlikely" to go to the polls with another person or indicated they were "Neutral" reported on the post-survey that they did not go to the polls with another person. Additionally, the majority of respondents who indicated they were "Likely" or "Extremely likely" to go to the polls with someone else on the pre-survey did not end up doing so, according to post-survey responses. Only five of 12 participants (42%) who reported that they were likely to go to the polls with another person ended up doing so.

Table 14: Intention and reported behavior for going to the polls with at least one other person

How likely are you to go to the polls or fill out a mail-in ballot with at least one other person? (Pre)	Did you go to the polls with at least one other person? (Post)		
	Yes	**No**	**Total**
Unlikely	0	1	1
Neutral	0	2	2
Likely	2	5	7
Extremely likely	3	2	5
Total	5	10	15

Similarly, the majority of respondents who were "Extremely unlikely" or "Unlikely" to fill out their mail-in ballot with at least one other person or indicated they were "Neutral" reported on the post-survey that they did not fill out their ballot with another person (*n* = 15; 68%). However, 32% (*n* = 7) of those who were unlikely or neutral on the pre-survey did end up filling out their mail-in ballot with at least one other person, according to post-survey responses. Moreover, the majority of respondents who were "Likely" or "Extremely likely" on the pre-survey to fill out their mail-in ballot with at least one other person reported doing so on the post-survey (*n* = 16; 62%), whereas 38% (*n* = 10) did not.

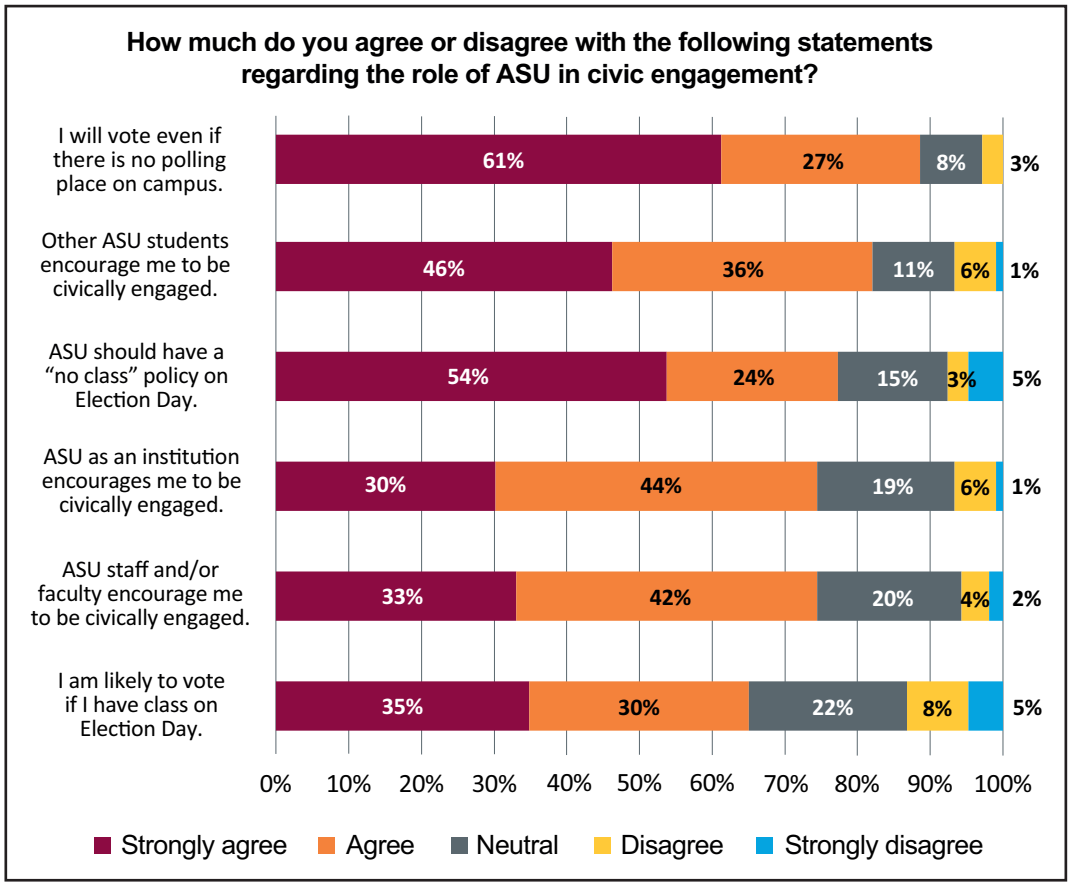
Table 15: Intention and reported behavior for filling out a mail-in ballot with at least one other person

How likely are you to go to the polls or fill out a mail-in ballot with at least one other person? (Pre)	Did you fill out your mail-in ballot with at least one other person? (Post)		
	Yes	**No**	**Total**
Extremely unlikely	1	4	5
Unlikely	2	6	8
Neutral	4	5	9
Likely	8	5	13
Extremely likely	8	5	13
Total	23	25	48

Engagement

On the pre-survey, participants were asked about their level of agreement or disagreement with ASU's involvement in civic engagement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Neutral" to "Strongly agree." The most agreement (participants who selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree") was evidenced on "I will vote even if there is no polling place on campus," "Other ASU students encourage me to be civically engaged," and "ASU should have a 'no class' policy on Election Day." The lowest level of agreement was evidenced on "I am likely to vote if I have class on Election Day;" however, 65% of the sample still agreed with this item. Taken together, the data suggests that ASU might increase civic engagement in voting if the university does not hold classes on election day.

Figure 1: Participant agreement about ASU's involvement in civic engagement (*n* = 106)



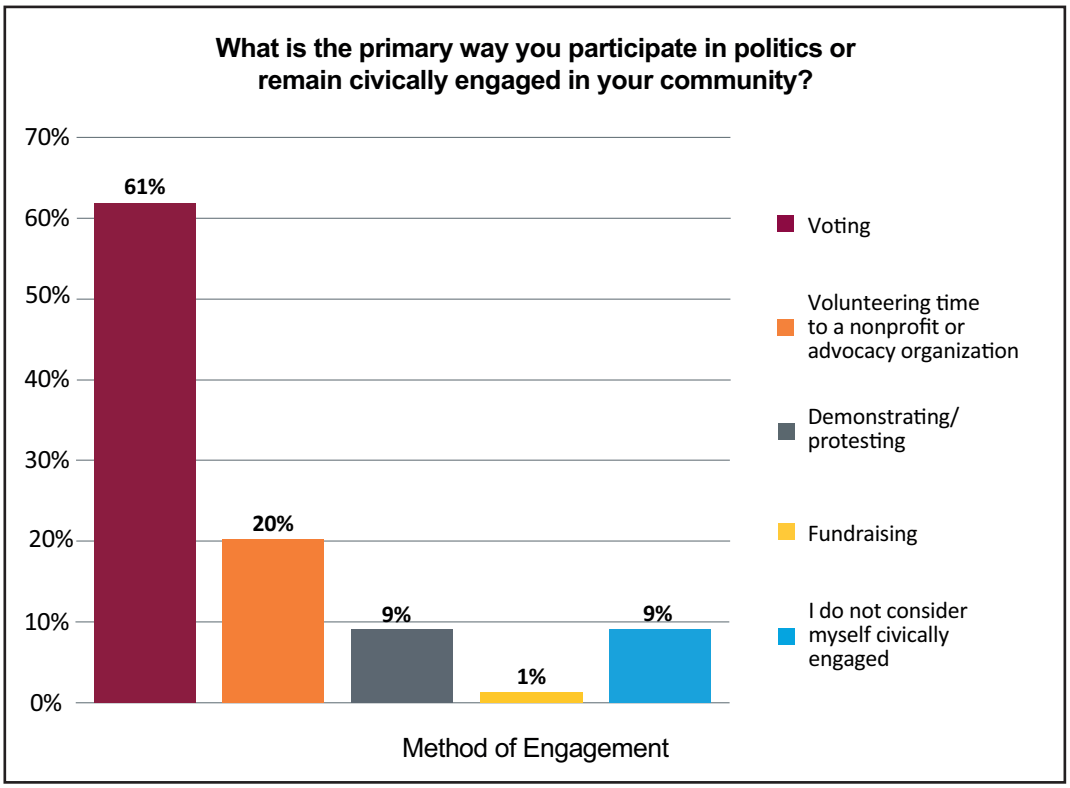
Participants were also asked if they had participated in a protest or demonstration in the previous year and if they had volunteered for a community organization (nonprofit, church, civic group, etc.) within the past year. Additionally, they were asked if they or their friends have ever participated in a protest or social demonstration. One hundred and seven participants responded to these questions.

Regarding personal engagement, the majority (*n* = 84; 79%) of respondents reported volunteering for a community organization in the last year. Conversely, most respondents (*n* = 76; 71%) had not participated in a protest or demonstration within the previous year.

Moreover, most respondents (*n* = 80; 75%) reported that other members of their friend group had previously participated in a protest or demonstration at some point in their lifetime. An additional 9% (*n* = 10) of participants selected "Not sure," and 16% (*n* = 17) selected "No."

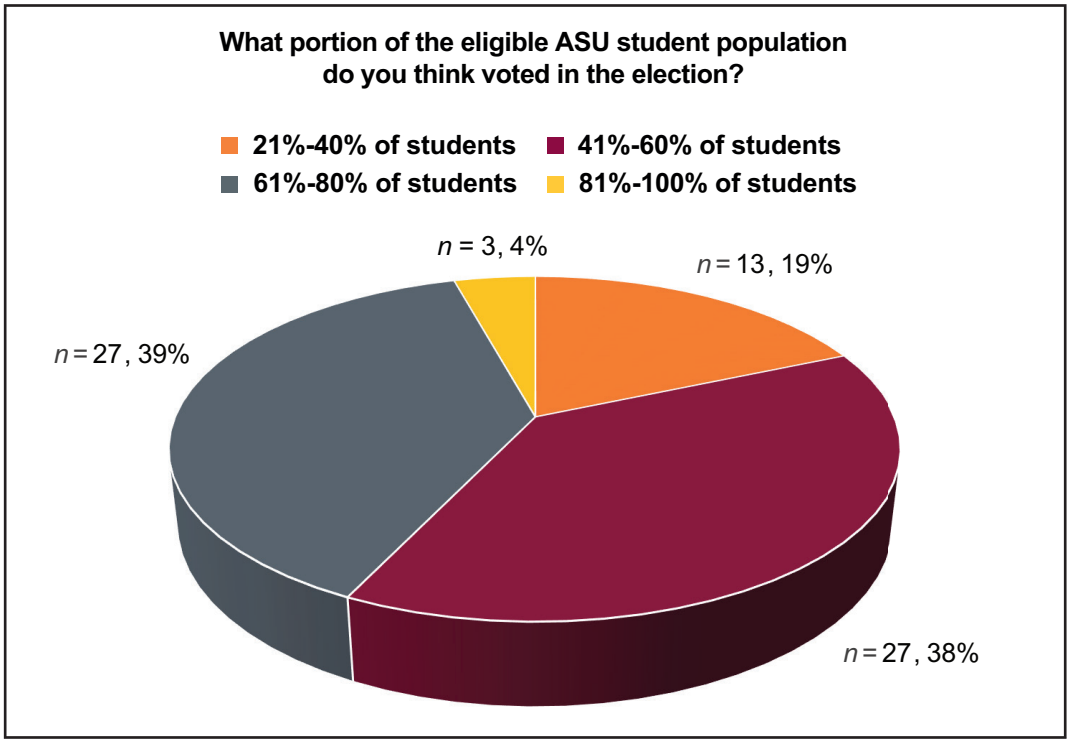
On the post-survey, participants were asked an additional question about personal civic engagement. Specifically, participants were asked about the primary way that they participate in politics or remain civically engaged in their community (Figure 2). Seventy of 72 participants responded to this question. The majority of respondents (61%) indicated their primary engagement was through voting. Another 20% reported primary engagement through volunteering time to a nonprofit or advocacy organization. Nine percent reported engagement through demonstrating or protesting, and 1% through fundraising. The remaining 9% indicated that they do not consider themselves to be civically engaged. Note that percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Figure 2: Primary method for participating in politics or remaining civically engaged (*n* = 70)



To explore perceived engagement of the ASU community, participants were asked what portion of the eligible ASU student population they believe voted in the November 3, 2020, election. On the post-survey, 78% of respondents (*n* = 54 of 70) thought 41-80% of ASU students voted (Figure 3). Specifically, 38% believed that 41-60% of students voted, and 39% believed that 61-80% of students voted. No participants thought that 0–21% of the ASU student population voted. At the time of this report, ASU voting rates for the 2020 general election were not available. However, national trends revealed that 66.2% of the estimated eligible voter population cast a ballot in the 2020 election, a 7% increase from the 2016 election. Data also indicate that voter turnout in 2020 rose in all 50 states, including Arizona, where an estimated 65-70% of the eligible voting population turned out.[18] Considering this and the ASU student voting rate for the 2016 election (58.7%), most participants' responses were within estimated ranges.[19]

Figure 3: Participants' perceptions of the proportion of ASU students who voted in the election



Information Sources

To better understand where ASU students get voting and election information, participants were asked about their use of various information sources on the pre-survey using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” One hundred and seven participants rated each of the items, with the exception of “Social Networks (friends, family members),” which was rated by 106 participants.

Figure 4: Sources of information regarding voting and elections

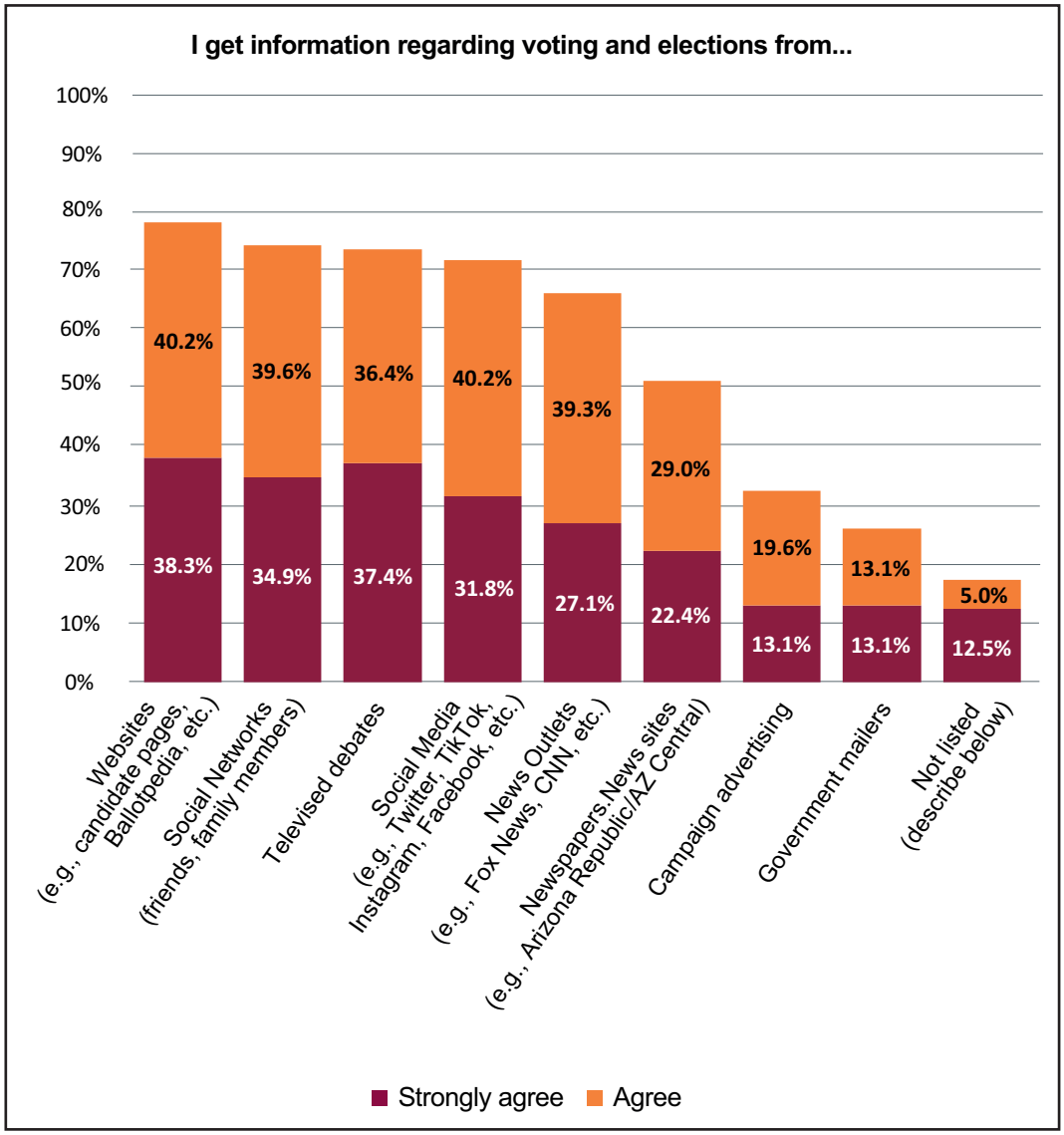


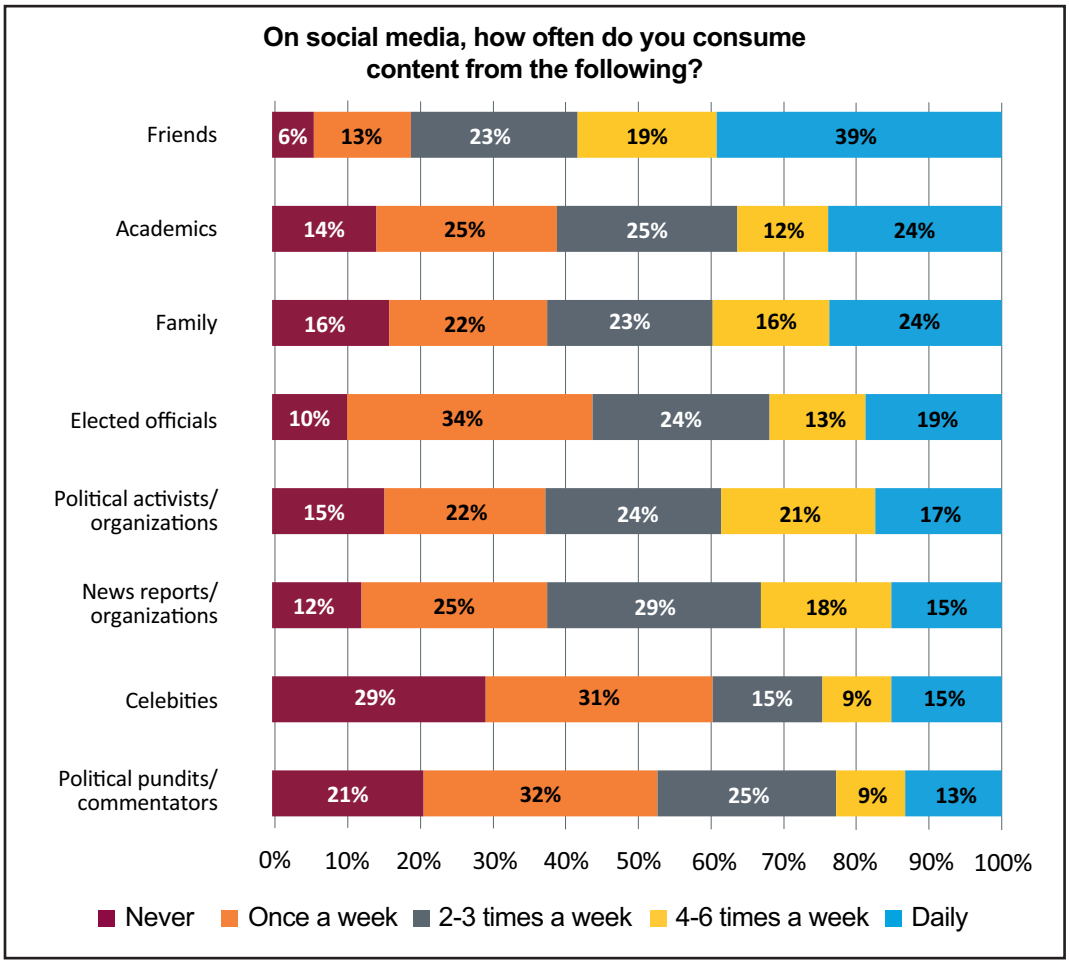
Figure 4 represents the percentage of respondents who selected “Strongly agree” or “Agree” for each news source. In descending order, the largest percentage of agreement was evidenced on websites (79%), social networks (75%), televised debates (74%), social media (72%), news outlets (71%), and Newspaper/News sites (52%). The least agreement was reported on campaign advertising (33%) and government mailers (26%); over 50% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with these items, and the remaining respondents were neutral. Eighteen percent of respondents (*n* = 7) reported agreement on the item “Not listed.” Five of the seven participants provided the following verbatim responses:

- I do my own research on policies that they’ve instated
- Own research
- Meeting candidates
- Political Commentators (Podcasts, YouTube)
- Posters on campus

This data suggests that ASU students are consuming voting and election information from a wide range of sources. They are receiving this information via various formats such as electronic, print, and conversation/word of mouth.

Participants were also asked how often they consume content from specific categories of individuals and organizations via social media (Figure 5). Participants responded on a scale including "Daily," "4-6 times a week," "2-3 times a week," "Once a week," and "Never." When examining frequencies for any amount of social media consumption (i.e., once a week, 2-3 times a week, 4-6 times a week, or daily), the most common social media consumption was from friends, elected officials, and news reporters/organizations, followed by academics, political activists/organizations, and family. With regard to daily consumption, participants consumed social media content from friends (39%), family (24%), and academics (24%) most frequently. Conversely, 29% of participants reported that they never consume content from celebrities and 21% reported never consuming content from political pundits/commentators.

Figure 5: Consumption of content from social media by various sources (*n* = 105-107)



Issues

On the pre-survey, participants were asked how often they are involved in conversations about a range of issues using a five-point Likert scale including “Never,” “Less than once a month,” “1–2 times a month,” “3–4 times a month,” and “5+ times a month” (Figure 6). Participants were also asked how important each of the issues is on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all important” to “Extremely important” (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Involvement in conversations about various issues (*n* = 104-106)

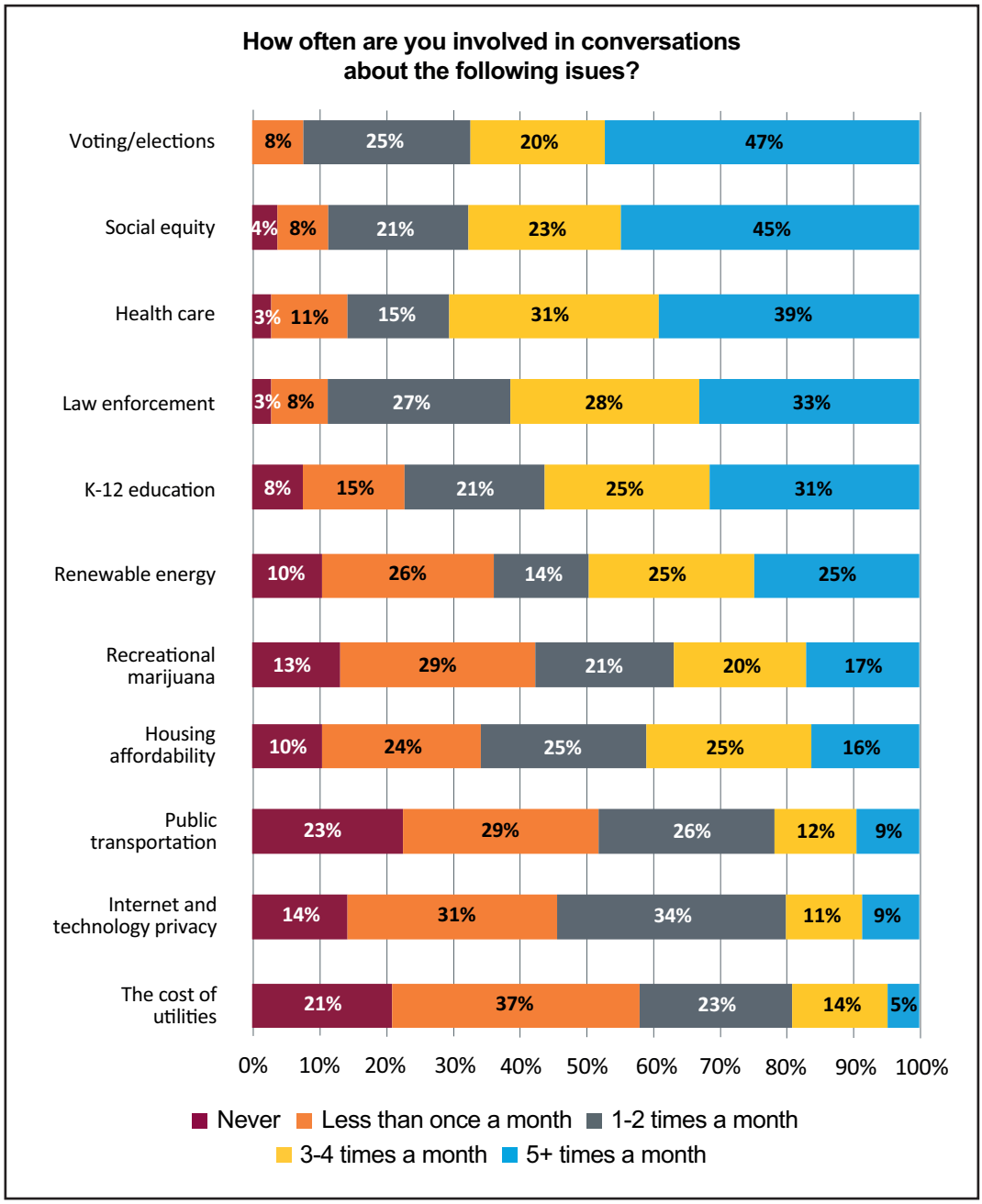
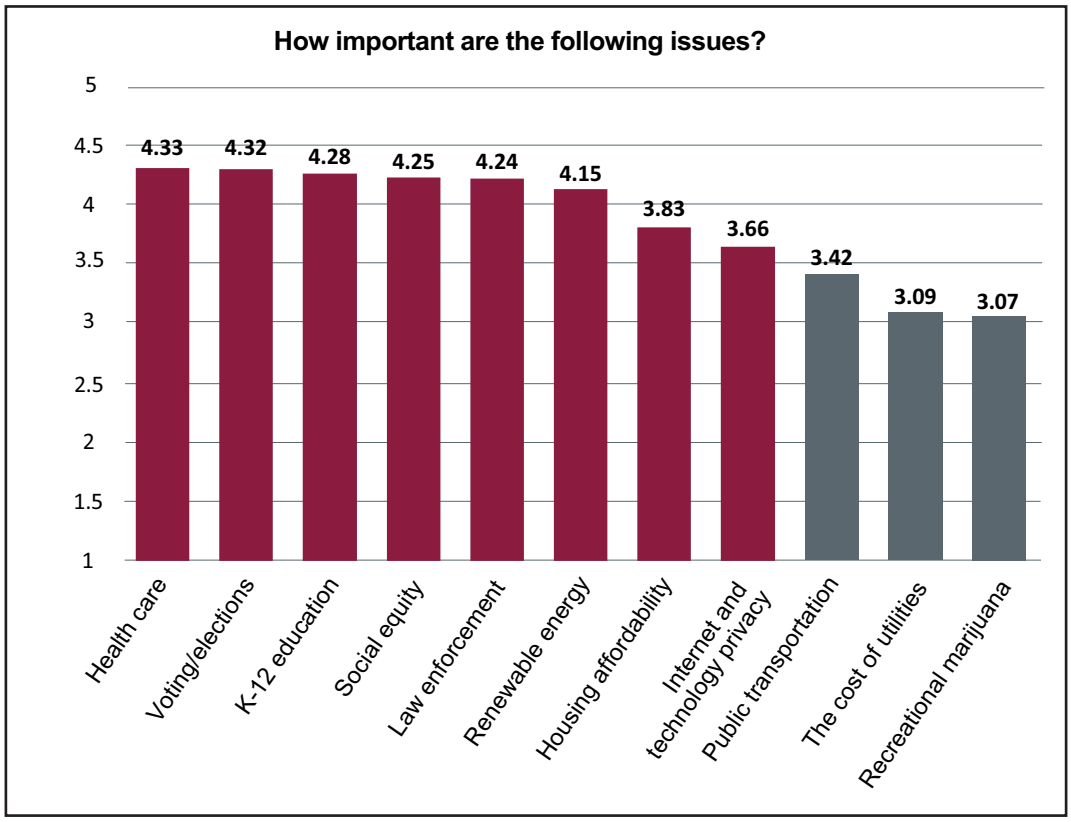


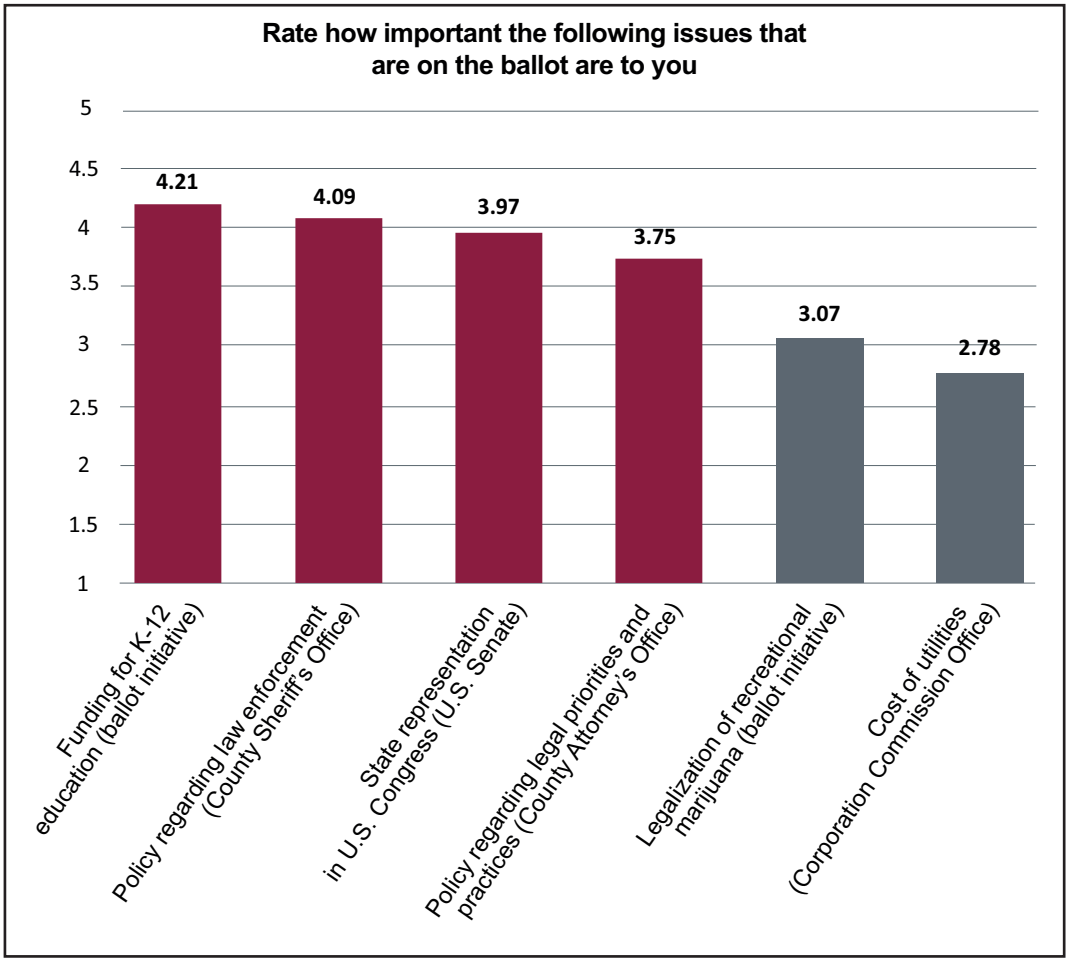
Figure 7: Participant-reported importance of various issues (*n* = 105-106)



Results showed that the most commonly discussed issues were also the issues that participants rated as most important. The issues that were rated as most important and most frequently discussed included voting/elections, social equity, health care, law enforcement, K-12 education, and renewable energy. Notably, all issues, on average, were rated as at least “Moderately important.”

Finally, on the pre-survey, participants were also asked to rate the importance of issues that were on the ballot in the election on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all important” to “Extremely important” (Figure 8). On average, the issues that were rated “Very important” (rounded to a 4.00 on the five-point scale) included “Funding for K-12 education,” “Policy regarding law enforcement,” “State representation in U.S. Congress,” and “Policy regarding legal priorities and practices.” “Legalization of recreational marijuana” and “Cost of utilities” were ranked as “Moderately important” on average.

Figure 8: Participant-reported importance of various issues on the ballot (*n* = 104)



When examining the frequency of responses for each response option (Table 16), over half of respondents (55%) rated “Funding for K-12 education” as “Extremely important” and just under one half (43%) rated “Policy regarding law enforcement” and “State representation in U.S. Congress” as “Extremely important.”

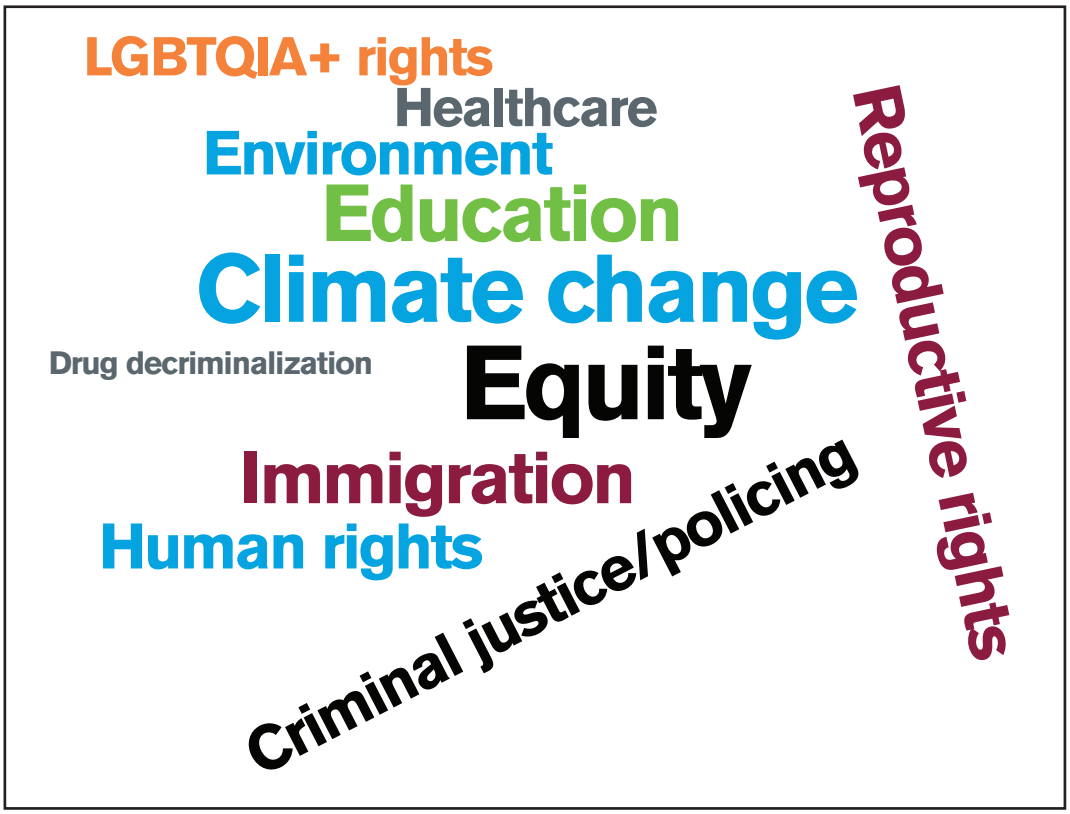
Table 16: Frequency and percent of responses for most important issues on the ballot (*n* = 104).

	Not at all Important	Slightly Inportant	Moderately Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
Funding for K-12 education (ballot initiative)	2 (1.9%)	6 (5.8%)	17 (16.3%)	22 (21.2%)	57 (54.8%)
Policy regarding law enforcement (County Sheriff’s Office)	0 (0.0%)	6 (5.8%)	22 (21.2%)	33 (31.7%)	43 (41.3%)
State representation in U.S. Congress (U.S. Senate)	3 (2.9%)	7 (6.7%)	23 (22.1%)	28 (26.9%)	43 (41.3%)
Policy regarding legal priorities and practices (County Attorney’s Office)	5 (4.8%)	8 (7.7%)	28 (26.9%)	30 (28.8%)	33 (31.7%)
Legalization of recreational marijuana (ballot initiative)	18 (17.3%)	21 (20.2%)	22 (21.2%)	22 (21.2%)	21 (20.2%)
Cost of utilities (Corporation Commission Office)	17 (16.3%)	22 (21.2%)	42 (40.4%)	13 (12.5%)	10 (9.6%)

On the post-survey, participants were asked in an open-ended question to describe what issue is most important to them. Fifty-four participants responded, with some participants reporting more than one issue (range = 1–6). Responses were coded to identify common categories of issues. The most common issues included climate change (*n* = 12), equity (*n* = 12), and education (*n* = 10). Notably, seven of the 12 responses (58%) that fell under equity specifically related to racial equity. Other responses were more general (e.g., "Liberation of the oppressed," "equal rights") or focused on another topic area, like "Women's rights."

Other categories that were mentioned included immigration (*n* = 6), reproductive rights (*n* = 5), the environment (*n* = 4), healthcare (*n* = 4), criminal justice or policing (*n* = 4), human rights (*n* = 3), LGBTQIA+ rights (*n* = 3), and drug decriminalization (*n* = 2). Ten responses contained unique issues that were coded as "Other." Other responses included "COVID-19," "social justice," "gun reform," "First Amendment rights," and "youth development" to provide some examples. Figure 9 is a word cloud containing the aforementioned themes, with larger words indicating more responses for that category.

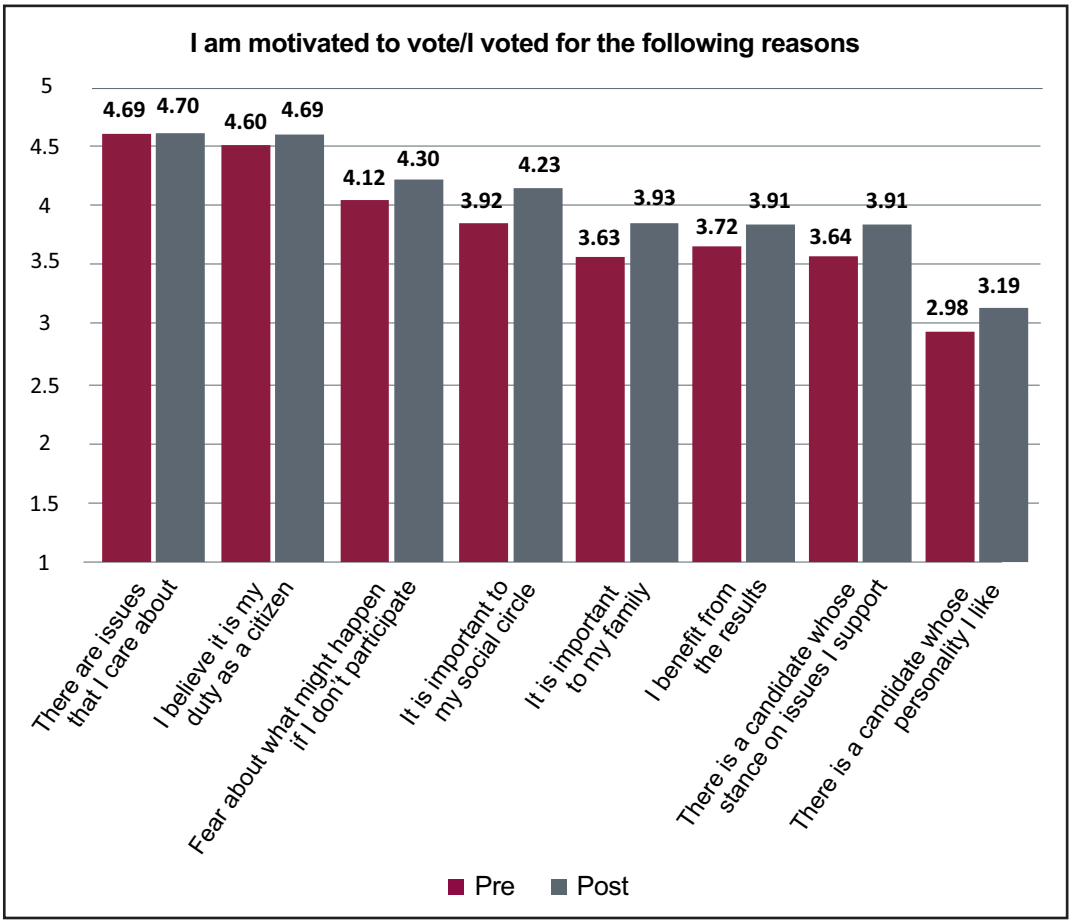
Figure 9: Word cloud representing the issues reported as most important



Motivation to Vote

Participants were asked a series of questions about their motivation to vote on the pre- and post-surveys to allow for a comparison of pre- and post-election rankings. Participants were asked to respond to each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." Figure 10 below represents responses from the analytic sample. The top three motivating factors on both the pre- and post-survey included "There are issues that I care about," "I believe it is my duty as a citizen," and "Fear about what might happen if I don't participate." The lowest-rated motivator on both surveys was "There is a candidate whose personality I like."

Figure 10: Pre- and post-election motivation to vote



As seen in Figure 10, all motivations evidenced increases from pre- to post-election. Most increases were slight; however, two increases reached statistical significance via a paired samples *t*-test. Specifically, statistically significant increases were seen for "It is important to my social circle" [$t(61) = 3.532$, $p = .001$], and "There is a candidate whose stance on the issues I support" [$t(61) = 2.878$, $p < .01$].[20]

To further explore motivation to vote, participants who indicated that they were likely to vote (selected "Agree" or "Strongly agree" on "Intention to vote") on the pre-survey were asked, "What is your strongest motivation for voting?" Seventy-one participants provided open-ended responses. Responses were coded, and five primary themes were identified. Some responses contained multiple themes and were coded more than once.

The most commonly cited theme for motivation to vote was to remove the current president (*n* = 21). Participants wrote about displeasure with the current administration and the motivation to ensure that the current administration's re-election was unsuccessful. The second-most common theme was related to creating change or improvements in the country (*n* = 18), where participants wrote about wanting to make a difference, create change, and/or fix or improve the country or society at large. Less prominent themes included voting to impact political or societal issues or to align with personal viewpoints (*n* = 11), voting because it is a civic right or duty (*n* = 11), and voting to voice an opinion or be heard (*n* = 6). Eight responses were unique and did not fall into one of the aforementioned themes (coded as "Other"). Table 17 offers example responses for all themes.

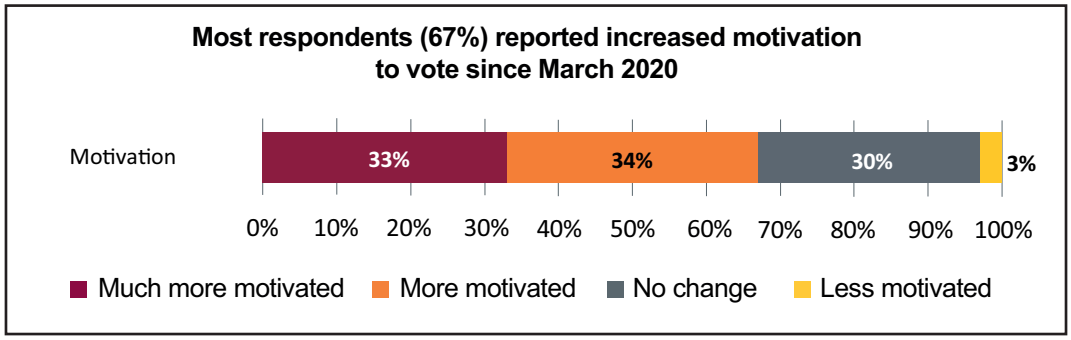
Table 17: Thematic coding of strongest motivation for voting

Theme	*n*	Example responses
Remove the current President	21	• I don't want Trump to win Presidency again. • I am very disappointed with the current Administration. • Wanting a new President.
Create change or improvement	18	• To make change in this country. • Fixing our country. • To create a safer and more united nation and to make our future better.
Issues, policies, or viewpoints	11	• My strongest motivation for voting is to elect the best candidate that will combat climate change in the most appropriate manner possible. • To elect candidiates that value smaller goverrnment and fiscal responsibility. • Healthcare, immigration, reproductive rights, same sex rights.
Civic right or duty	11	• Civic duty. I have the ability to vote so I am going to vote. I believe it is my right and duty to choose an elected official because by voting I have a say in government. • It's a right granted us. • Just exercising my right to vote.
To be heard	6	• Voicing my opinions on who should be in office. • Having a say in big decisions that affect me. • I want to make sure my voice is expressed politically, but the only way I can make that happen is by voting.
Other	9	• People say I should. • It has the highest return for any political activism I have the time to put in. • Important to me. • I don't want to lose my rights.

On the post-survey, participants were also asked, “How has your motivation to vote changed since March 2020 (post-spring break)?” (Figure 11) and “How has your awareness of social activism changed since March 2020 (post-spring break)? For example, being aware of social issues, how people react to social problems, educational materials about social issues, etc.)” (Figure 12).

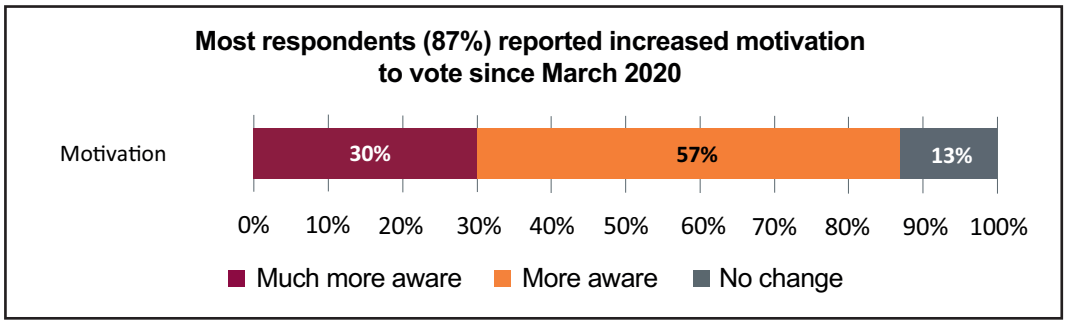
Regarding motivation, most respondents (n = 47; 67%) reported that they are more or much more motivated to vote since March 2020, followed by 21 respondents (30%) who reported no change. Two respondents (3%) indicated being “Less motivated.”

Figure 11: Respondents’ change in motivation to vote since March 2020 (*n* = 70)



Regarding awareness of social activism, the vast majority of respondents (n = 61; 87%) reported being more or much more aware of social activism, like social issues or how people respond to social problems. The remaining respondents (n = 9; 13%) indicated no change in awareness (Figure 12).

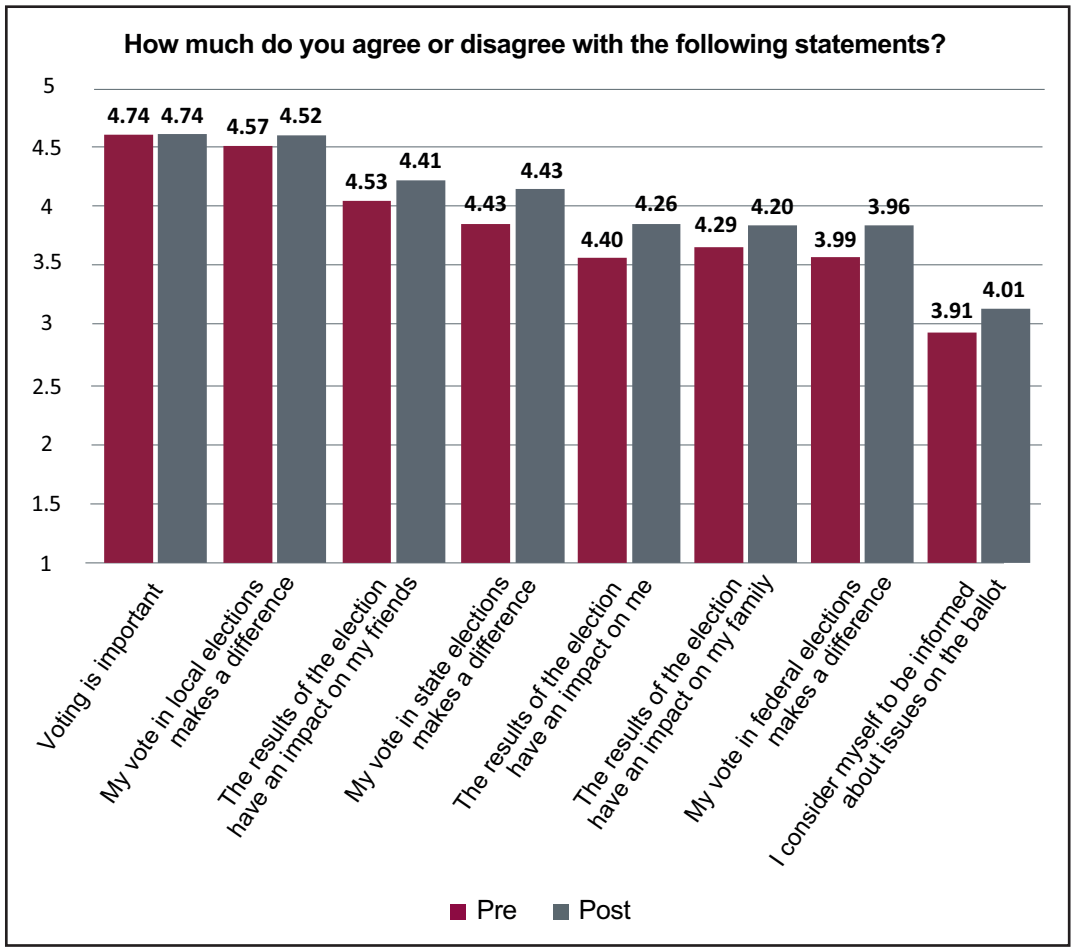
Figure 12: Respondents’ change in awareness of social activism since March 2020 (*n* = 70)



Voting Perceptions and Attitudes

Participants were asked a series of questions about their voting attitudes and perceptions of voting on the pre- and post-survey to allow for a comparison of pre- and post-election rankings (Figure 13). Participants were asked to respond to each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Neutral" to "Strongly agree." In general, all mean responses from the pre- and post-survey fell within the realms of "Agree" or "Strongly agree."

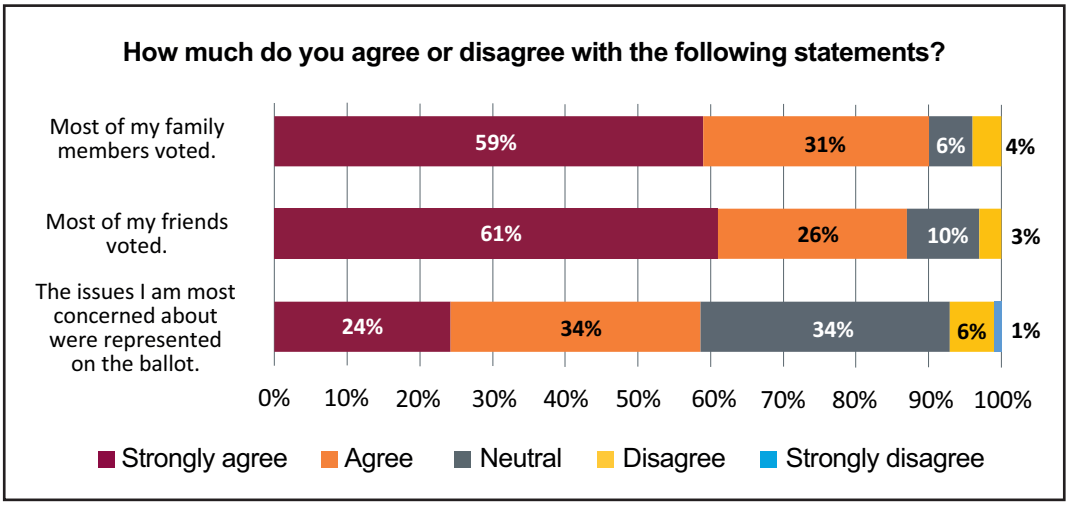
Figure 13: Attitudes toward, and perception of voting, pre- and post-election (*n* = 69-70)



The highest-rated item, "Voting is important" (*M* = 4.74), did not evidence a mean change from pre- to post-election. Similarly, "My vote in state elections makes a difference" (*M* = 4.43) also did not change. Other items evidenced slight increases or decreases. However, none of these changes reached statistical significance; therefore, the differences from pre- to post- cannot be interpreted as meaningful change.

Three additional questions related to perceptions of voting behavior and ballot issues were asked on the post-survey only (Figure 14). The most agreement was found for "Most of my family members voted" (90% strongly agreed or agreed), followed by "Most of my friends voted" (87% strongly agreed or agreed). The least agreement was seen for "The issues I am most concerned about were represented on the ballot;" however, this statement still evidenced agreement by 58% of respondents. Notably, this item also evidenced the most neutral responses (*n* = 24; 34%).

Figure 14: Post-election perceptions of voting behavior and ballot issues (*n* = 70)



Discussion

Overall, the current study sample included a range of college students representing various schools/colleges, living situations, and class standings at Arizona State University. Participants were primarily registered to vote in Arizona and, at the pre-election timepoint, most intended to vote. All but one participant reported voting in the election at the post-election timepoint. Contrary to previous literature, findings do not suggest that students are opting to participate in alternative forms of civic engagement, such as protests or social demonstrations, instead of voting. In fact, 61% of respondents on the post-survey reported voting as their primary form of civic engagement.[21]

Findings from the current study show that students were motivated to vote for a number of reasons, such as to remove the current administration from office, impact social and political issues they care about, create change, and carry out their civic right or duty to vote. Participants also indicated being motivated because voting is important to their social circles and family, they felt they would benefit from the results of the election, and there was a candidate whose stance on issues they supported. Furthermore, most students reported an increase in motivation to vote leading up to the November election.

Similarly, students strongly agreed, on average, that voting is important and that their participation as a voter in local elections makes a difference. They also agreed, on average, that their vote in state and federal elections makes a difference, that they felt informed about issues on the ballot, and that the election results have an impact on themselves, their friends, and their family. Taken together, findings suggest that this sample of students was highly motivated to vote and that they believe that voting has important implications for their social networks and the issues they care about. Concurrently, these findings make it difficult to draw conclusions about how to engage less-motivated or uninterested students.

Results also highlight that students are consuming voting and election information from a wide range of sources, with websites, social networks, televised debates, social media, and news outlets cited most frequently. Interestingly, more official sources of information, such as campaign advertising and government mailers, were ranked lowest. With regard to social media consumption, students indicated that they consume content from friends, academics, and family most frequently; however, all social media sources were rated fairly high. Social media content from celebrities and political pundits/commentators was consumed least frequently.

It must be noted that the sociopolitical context in which this study took place was unique in that the 2020 general election turned out more voters than any other election since 1900.[22] Additionally, the election and related campaigning took place during an unprecedented global pandemic, which likely influenced voting behaviors. For example, students may not have gone to the polls or filled out ballots with others. Furthermore, they may have opted to vote by mail because of physical distancing precautions, not a pre-existing preference for mail-in voting. Seventy-three percent of students in the current study voted by mail. This is comparable to statewide data showing that 85% of Arizonans used mail-in ballots in 2020—a substantial increase (63%) from 2016.[23] ASU student voting data for the 2020 election were not available at the time of reporting.

Limitations and Future Directions

In this study, civic engagement and voting motivations, attitudes, and behaviors were measured among a sample of Arizona State University students. Future research would benefit from exploring these constructs among a broader and more diverse audience of young voters. Future efforts should aim to include voters from diverse racial/ethnic groups and target under-represented young voters within and outside of the university setting from varying geographical locations (i.e., urban, rural). Within these subpopulations, specific targets may include first-generation and community college students, as well as non-college youth/young adults.

One limitation of this study is that the self-selected student sample was fairly homogenous. The vast majority of participants were highly motivated and planning to vote (95.4% intended to vote at the time of the pre-survey, and 98.7% of the analytic sample did vote). Based on the findings, future directions appear to be less about how to motivate this subset of students to vote and rather to explore ways to maintain or expand civic engagement in non-election years such that this momentum carries forward to voting in future elections. For example, universities and community organizations may strive to center students in their efforts to promote policy information and volunteer opportunities related to issues that students find important. This type of involvement may help students who are already engaged expand their civic participation in local elections and volunteering.

Investigators might also explore ways to increase engagement among peer groups. Findings show that students are likely to get voting information from their social networks and frequently consume social media content. Students also reported being motivated to vote based on the belief that it is important to their social circle and generally agreed that voting has an impact on their friends.

Impacting social issues (i.e., health care, education, social equity, climate change) also appears to be highly motivating for students. Future efforts might target social media campaigns related to social issues relevant to peer groups. For example, disseminating accurate information about issues, and candidates' stances on the issues, may motivate students' social circles to become more involved. Placing students at the center of information and engagement campaigns may prove useful for expanding reach to their less-engaged peers and friends.

Future research may also benefit from exploring ways to enhance the presentation and dissemination of voting and election information from official sources such as government mailers. For example, re-examining the design and utility of voter guides may highlight ways to tailor the guides so that young voters may better utilize them. Lastly, the format of dissemination is essential. Findings from the current study suggest that young voters may be more likely to consume or be exposed to voting and election information if it is disseminated via social media. A social media campaign designed to reach this demographic may be effective for communicating resources and voter information.

Endnotes

[1] National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, "2012 & 2016 Campus Report: Student Voting Rates for Arizona State University-Tempe" (Medford: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2017), https://www.allinchallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/Arizona-State-University-NSLVE-2016-1.pdf.

[2] National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, "2014 & 2018 Campus Report: Student Voting Rates for Arizona State University-Tempe" (Medford: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2019), https://publicservice.asu.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/2019/10/2014_and_2018_nslve_report-arizona_state_university_1.pdf.

[3] John B. Holbein and D. Sunshine Hillygus, Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[4] National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, "2014 & 2018 Campus Report" (see Note 2).

[5] Martin P. Wattenberg, Is Voting for Young People? (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[6] Holbein and Hillygus, Making Young Voters (see Note 3); Reynol Junco, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Lashon Amado, Victoria Fahlberg, and Laurel Bliss, "Expanding the Electorate: How Simple Changes in Election Administration Can Improve Voter Participation among Low-Income Youth" (Medford: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2018), https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/expanding_electorate_oyu_report.pdf.

[7] Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood," American Political Science Review 96, no. 1 (2002): 41-56.

[8] Political consumerism is defined as "instances when people evaluate and choose producers and products because they want to change ethically, environmentally, or politically objectionable institutional or market practices," Michelle Micheletti and Magnus Boström, "Political Consumerism: Consumer Choice, Information, and Labeling," in Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics, ed. Paul B. Thompson and David M. Kaplan (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014): 1508-1515.

[9] Stacy G. Ulbig and Tamara Waggener, "Getting Registered and Getting to the Polls: the Impact of Voter Registration Strategy and Information Provision on Turnout of College Students," PS: Political Science and Politics 44, no. 3 (2011): 544-551.

[10] Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

[11] Ryan D. Enos, Anthony Fowler and Lynn Vavreck, "Increasing Inequality: The Effect of GOTV Mobilization on the Composition of the Electorate," The Journal of Politics 76, no. 1 (2014): 273-288.

[12] Means, frequencies, and paired samples t-tests were computed for quantitative data using SPSS 26.0. Qualitative data was coded using inductive thematic analysis in Excel.

[13] National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, "2014 & 2018 Campus Report" (see Note 2).

[14] Arizona State University, "Facts at a Glance" (Tempe: Arizona State University, 2019), https://uoia.asu.edu/sites/default/files/facts_at_a_glance_fall_2019.pdf.

[15] Analytic sample: The participant who selected "Not listed" identified as "Mixed Race." Three participants who selected more than one racial category identified as "Asian" and "White," and one identified as "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander." Full sample: Of the two participants who selected "Not listed," one identified as "Mixed Race," and the other identified as "Multi/Other." Six of the nine participants who selected more than one racial category identified as "Asian" and "White," two identified as "Asian" and "Black or African American," and one identified as "Asian" and "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander."

[16] Arizona State University, "Enrollment by College and Department" (Tempe: Arizona State University, 2019), https://www.asu.edu/facts/#/facts/enrollment/department-metro-campus.

[17] Percentage of undergraduates living in a dorm was calculated using the number of undergraduate students living on campus in fall 2020 as the numerator and total undergraduate enrollment from fall 2019 as the denominator. Enrollment data for fall 2020 was not available at the time of this report. Data from: C. Shapiro, Personal Communication, February 23, 2021.

[18] Drew Desilver, "Turnout Soared in 2020 as Nearly Two-Thirds of Eligible U.S. Voters Cast Ballots for President" (Washington, The Pew Research Center, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/28/turnout-soared-in-2020-as-nearly-two-thirds-of-eligible-u-s-voters-cast-ballots-for-president/.

[19] National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, "2017 Campus Report" (see Note 1).

[20] Statistical significance denotes the probability that a change is not due to chance such that the same result would occur 95 out of 100 times if the analysis was replicated. The statement "It is important to my family" also reached statistical significance [$t(62) = 2.342$, $p < .05$]. However, upon the completion of post-hoc power analyses using G*Power, it was determined that this analysis was inadequately powered ($1 - \beta < 0.80$) and, therefore, meaningful change cannot accurately be detected for the given effect.

[21] Russel J. Dalton, "Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation," Political Studies 56, no. 1 (2008): 76-98; Ellen Quintelier, "Differences in Political Participation Between Young and Old People," Contemporary Politics 13, no. 2 (2007): 165-180; Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Arpini, A New Engagement?: Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[22] Michael P. McDonald, "National General Election VEP Turnout Rates, 1789-Present" (Gainesville, United States Election Project, 2021), http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present.

[23] "Arizona Election Results 2020" (NBC News, January 27, 2021), https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-elections/arizona-results.

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