

TO: The Voter Participation Center
FROM: Geoff Garin, Corrie Hunt, Annie Norbitz, and Aileen Cardona
DATE: August 26, 2020
RE: Turning Young Activists into Voters

The findings in this memo are based on two online discussion boards among young nonvoters who engaged in this summer's movement for racial justice, conducted August 12 to 14, 2020. One board consisted of whites age 18-34 and the other of people of color age 18-34. None of the participants voted in either the 2016 or 2018 elections (including some who were too young to have done so), but all have actively engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. This summer's nationwide groundswell around addressing racial injustice has energized these young people in new and unprecedented ways.**
 - The protests have imbued these young people with a sense of power (*to make change*), hope (*that change is within reach*), and responsibility (*to support the greater good*).
 - What's more, they have served as proof of the potency of collective action.
- 2. These young people desperately want to see change—and, while it isn't a magic bullet, voting is one key mechanism toward getting there.**
 - Donald Trump symbolizes the hatred, self-interest, and closed-mindedness that they are protesting against. *Voting him out of office is a critical part of the larger fight for justice.*
 - Like protesting, voting is a form of collective action. And whether it's protesting in the streets or donning a mask, these voters feel deeply that this is a moment in which we must put our self-interest aside in order to support the collective good.

3. Protesting without voting is insufficient—but voting without protesting is not enough either.

- Participants have witnessed the effectiveness of the protests in drawing needed attention to an issue and in changing hearts and minds.
- Now, voting is needed in order to translate the will of the people into the letter of the law.

4. Heading into November, fighting racism and stopping the spread of COVID-19 are the most salient issues on these young voters' minds.

- However, there are a plethora of other structural issues that they want to see addressed—and it is the longstanding failure to address them that, for many, has festered deep disaffection with the political system and doubts that candidates will follow through on their promises.

5. The movement was conceived on social media, where it was quickly catapulted to become an omnipresent part of these young voters' daily lives.

- Social media provided moment-to-moment updates, resources, and educational tools on the movement.
- However, the importance of social media transcends logistics and information: it also created a sense of community and, ultimately, duty. The more they saw friends, family, and other connections posting about the movement, the more they were inspired and compelled to get involved too.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While these young people see voting as a logical next step, they are more passionate about the act of protesting than they are about the act of voting. In fact, many only are enthusiastic about voting this November *because* of the protests.

- It will be imperative to carry this summer's fierce energy forward into the fall, continuing the momentum that the protests started and bringing it to the ballot box. Just as social media was a powerful engine behind the protest movement, so it should be for the vote.

- We should be careful not to downplay the protests as an agent of change when building up the need to vote. These voters see the success of the protests as evidence of the potential for success in the voting booth. We must emphasize how voting continues what the protests started.
- 2. These young people are angry, frustrated, and fearful for the country's future—but for many, it is this very anger that is driving their enthusiasm to vote. By contrast, if they DON'T vote this November, it will be because they feel hopeless and defeated.**
 - Messaging that validates their anger and translates it into a call to action gives these voters a sense of agency. Furthermore, pointing to electoral and policy “wins” that already have occurred throughout the country at the state and local level provides evidence that voting can indeed lead to positive change.
 - 3. For these voters, this summer's protests have been about much more than just police brutality. They view racism as structural and systemic, and there are many concrete policy changes that they want to see enacted. They are drawn to candidates who not only are able to cultivate real energy around the movement (*talk the talk*), but have concrete, actionable plans for lifting up communities of color (*walk the walk*).**
 - Highlighting candidates' agendas around tackling systemic racism from multiple angles makes these young people more motivated to support them.
 - 4. While many are skeptical that real change happens at the federal level, they nearly universally recognize the importance of state and local elections in making a change in their lives. However, the vast majority readily admit that they do not know enough about what is down the ballot and express a desire to learn more.**
 - Localizing the stakes of this election when it comes to the issues these voters care about (*NOT just racial justice issues, but a whole host of progressive priorities*) will help override their skepticism about the efficacy of voting in the presidential race alone, while making the election feel more personally relevant.