



# Growing and Diversifying Youth Climate Activism: Challenges, Strategies, and Pathways to Electoral Participation

## Introduction

Young people across the world and in the U.S. have been at the center of making climate a larger and more urgent public conversation. In recent years, climate change and the environment have emerged as a top concern for youth in the U.S.; they have played a leading role in climate activism and have frequently cited the environment as [one of the top issues](#) influencing their vote. Climate activism can serve as a pathway for young people to develop as civic actors, leading to voting and to other forms of participation. However, as this paper will show, there is more untapped potential for climate action to play that role.

Action for the Climate Emergency (ACE) and Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) partnered to examine how climate-focused organizations can reach a wider diversity of young people, both to strengthen their efforts and to deepen youth civic and political engagement. In this report, we offer findings from a unique online survey of youth who are concerned about the climate and make recommendations for how climate and environmental organizations can expand their outreach and bring more youth into their work, especially those from historically underserved groups and others who are currently not engaging in much activism.

### Highlights include:

- Interest and concern over climate and the environment exist among youth across geography, gender, race/ethnicity, ideology, and political party affiliation.
- There is substantial opportunity to increase the climate actions being taken by youth.
- Young people who do not self-identify as liberal or as a Democrat (and even some who do) want additional skills and support to take more action.
- The focus on organizing events among diverse youth of color may indicate a need for more communal organizing opportunities.
- While they express concern for the climate, young people who identify as conservative, Republican, or say they do not know their political ideology are less comfortable speaking with others on this topic, suggesting a need for opportunities to build this comfort and skills.

## Why More Data? This Unique Survey

While data exist about [how Americans think about climate change](#) and [teenagers' climate literacy](#), there is little research that disaggregates findings among youth by race/ethnicity, party affiliation, or other key points of variation. [Recommendations developed](#) for the Environmental Protection Agency and other large stakeholders specifically about young people also did not try to understand where various youth are developmentally with respect to climate activism, or how different youth fit into a ladder of activism. Understanding differences *among youth* is key to involving new audiences in ACE's work and to retaining them in a distributed model of organizing.

This paper presents findings from a survey of 3,451 young people, ages 14-25, who had recently joined ACE through ad-based recruitment or were ACE members who had been inactive for the past 12 months. As such, this is not a nationally representative sample of youth, both in terms of their views about climate change and demographically. In addition, 76% of participants are from eight states where ACE is largely focused: FL, TX, NC, OH, PA, AZ, WI, and NV—with more than a third from Florida and Texas alone. Additional methodological details are available upon request.

### **About CIRCLE and ACE**

[CIRCLE](#), the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, is a leading nonpartisan research institution on young people's civic participation. Based at Tufts University's [Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life](#), CIRCLE is focused on understanding and eliminating the barriers that prevent some youth from engaging in voting and other forms of civic and political action, with the ultimate goal of creating a more representative and equitable democracy.

[ACE, Action for the Climate Emergency](#), is a national organization that educates, inspires and supports young people to lead climate action. ACE works to ensure they have everything they need to understand the science and advocate for solutions to the climate emergency. Its Youth Action Network provides young people opportunities to advocate for climate justice and a fair democracy and plugs youth into local, state, and national actions to help stop the climate emergency.

## Some Youth Are Taking Climate Action, but There Are Differences in Who Participates And How

Climate action can take many forms. Our survey reveals that different youth who are new to climate action, or have not been as engaged in it, may participate in different ways. In the survey, we asked how frequently youth had taken seven different types of action in the past year, from 0 to 3 or more times. Signing a petition, having a conversation with relatives or peers, and using social media to inform or engage others were the most frequent actions taken by youth.



A major part of this research was identifying differences in actions taken among youth, in order to understand where support may be necessary to deepen engagement. Importantly, the below differences between groups cannot be attributed to youth having different levels of strengths like readiness, efficacy, and motivation. Although the next section discusses which groups of youth had low vs. high levels of various strengths, the group differences discussed below accounted for youths' strengths in the analyses. Thus, the demographic differences in action-taking listed below must be addressed by considering additional contextual and cultural dynamics at play.

- **Age:** The youngest respondents (ages 14-19) were more likely than their slightly older (ages 20-24) peers to sign petitions, plan events, and use social media to inform and engage.
- **Gender:** Non-binary youth and women were more likely than men to sign petitions and use social media. Non-binary youth were also more likely than other youth to contact an elected official. Men were the least likely to have conversations with family and peers.

- **Race/ethnicity:** Black youth and youth in the “other” category<sup>1</sup> were less likely than white youth to sign petitions, have conversations, and use social media. Black youth were also less likely than their white peers to contact elected officials. Hispanic/Latino youth were less likely to have conversations than white youth. Black youth, Hispanic/Latino youth, and “other” youth were all more likely than white youth to plan events in their school or community (in-person or online).
- **Political ideology:** Liberals were most likely to sign petitions, have conversations, contact elected officials, and use social media. Conservatives and youth who said they’re “in the middle” were more likely than liberals to plan events.
- **Party affiliation:** Republicans had lower rates than Democrats of attending or speaking at public hearings and meetings, and of participating in community events or protests. Youth in a third party were more likely to sign petitions than Democrats.

The trends identified in our survey paint a picture of differences in which youth are engaging at higher rates: teens, white youth, and young liberals. They also highlight who is not participating at similar rates and may need more support to do so: Black youth, young men, conservative youth, and Republican youth.

Our findings also begin to suggest some possible pathways for addressing those differences, like tapping into the power and potential of events. Both planning and participating in events seem to eliminate several differences between youth who are more or less likely to engage in other actions. Youth of color including Black youth, Hispanic/Latino youth, and youth in the “other” category were all more likely, at a statistically significant level, to plan an event in their school or community.

The same is true by gender and by political ideology. Young men are about as likely as young women and non-binary youth to plan events, attend public meetings/hearings, and participate in community events and rallies. Furthermore, youth who identify as conservative are about as likely as liberal youth to attend meetings and participate in community events, and are in fact more likely than liberals to plan events. This trend did not hold for party affiliation, however. Republican youth, compared to Democrats, were less likely to attend meetings and participate in community events.

It is possible that the communal aspect of event participation and planning, and the support from peers and/or from an institution like school, is critical to engaging youth who are otherwise less likely to take climate action overall.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth of color identifying as Asian, Middle Eastern or Northern African, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander were classified as belonging to an “other” racial-ethnic category due to sample sizes.

# Why Youth Do Or Don't Engage: Considering Youth Strengths and Comfort

While some young people are taking action, we classify 71% of youth in our survey as not yet engaged in climate activism, meaning they currently score low on actions taken. We explored what helps young people take climate action in order to imagine how organizations can instill those strengths and extend those support systems to more and more diverse young people.

Existing research suggests that there are varied dispositions and experiences that youth need in order to take action. Our survey examined how youth rated on three "strengths" that would be relevant to their engagement in climate action: readiness, efficacy, and motivation. We found positive statistical associations between one or more of these strengths and taking action, and we found that certain groups of young people differed in their level of strengths.

The survey asked respondents to rate, on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, how they felt about various prompts related to each type of strength, which included but weren't limited to:

### Readiness



- I am ready to discuss climate and environmental issues with other people.
- I can inspire others to take action on climate and environmental issues.
- I can present information about climate and environmental issues to other people.

### Efficacy



- I can balance taking actions with work or school.
- I know how I can play a part in helping.
- I have the knowledge and skills to do the action.

### Motivation



- It looks good on my college applications or my resume.
- I understand what the big picture of the problem is.
- People important to me support me.

We found that readiness was most related to short-term climate actions, such as posting on social media, signing a petition, having a conversation, or contacting an official, while efficacy and motivation were required for higher-effort, longer-term actions such as planning a protest or event or speaking publicly.

		Actions						
		Petition	Conversation	Contact elected	Speak publicly	Protest, events	Planning an event	Using social media
Skills	Readiness							
	Efficacy							
	Motivation							

As with actions taken, we examined demographic differences in the levels of each strength felt by youth and found that some correspond to trends in likelihood to take action:

- The teen respondents (ages 14-19) rated higher in efficacy and readiness than their slightly older peers.
- Readiness and motivation were lower among young men compared to young women (for motivation) and both women and non-binary youth (for readiness).
- Youth who said they “did not know” their political ideology scored lower in motivation to take action than those in the middle and conservatives, while liberal youth scored highest in readiness.
- In terms of party affiliation, youth who identify with a third party had higher readiness, efficacy, and motivation than Republicans and those with no affiliation. Third-party youth had higher levels of readiness and efficacy than Democrats, while Democrats had higher readiness and motivation than Republicans.

These differences in strengths are only part of the answer as to why some youth do or don’t engage. Our analyses demonstrated that, even after accounting for these individual differences in readiness, efficacy, and motivation, the likelihood that a young person takes part in different actions is related to some demographic factors.

Notably, there were no significant differences in either readiness, efficacy, or motivation by race/ethnicity that can explain the lower levels of action we see from Black youth and other youth of color. On the one hand, it’s positive that all young people, regardless of race, are similarly willing and feel able to take climate action. On the other hand, it means that additional barriers or factors are accounting for the differences in actions taken among youth. That may require organizations to reflect on assumptions and inclusivity in order to bring a broader diversity of youth into this work.

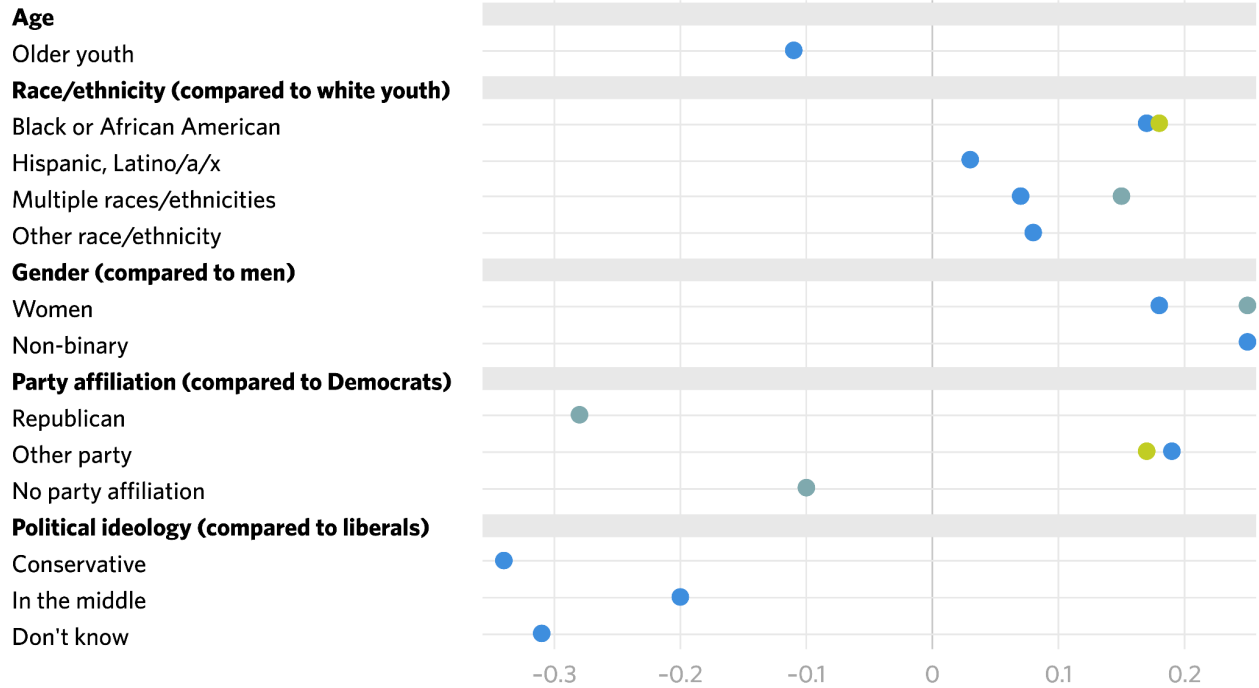
## Discomfort with Engaging Others May Explain Lack of Engagement

One potential explanation for some differences in which youth take action, even after accounting for the strengths outlined above, are different levels of comfort in engaging various stakeholders in climate action. We asked youth in our survey how comfortable they felt talking to and trying to bring in different audiences into their efforts on climate. Youth overall were most likely to feel comfortable trying to engage friends, family, and their online networks. They were least likely to say they felt comfortable approaching state and federal government officials—though a majority still described themselves as at least “probably” comfortable.

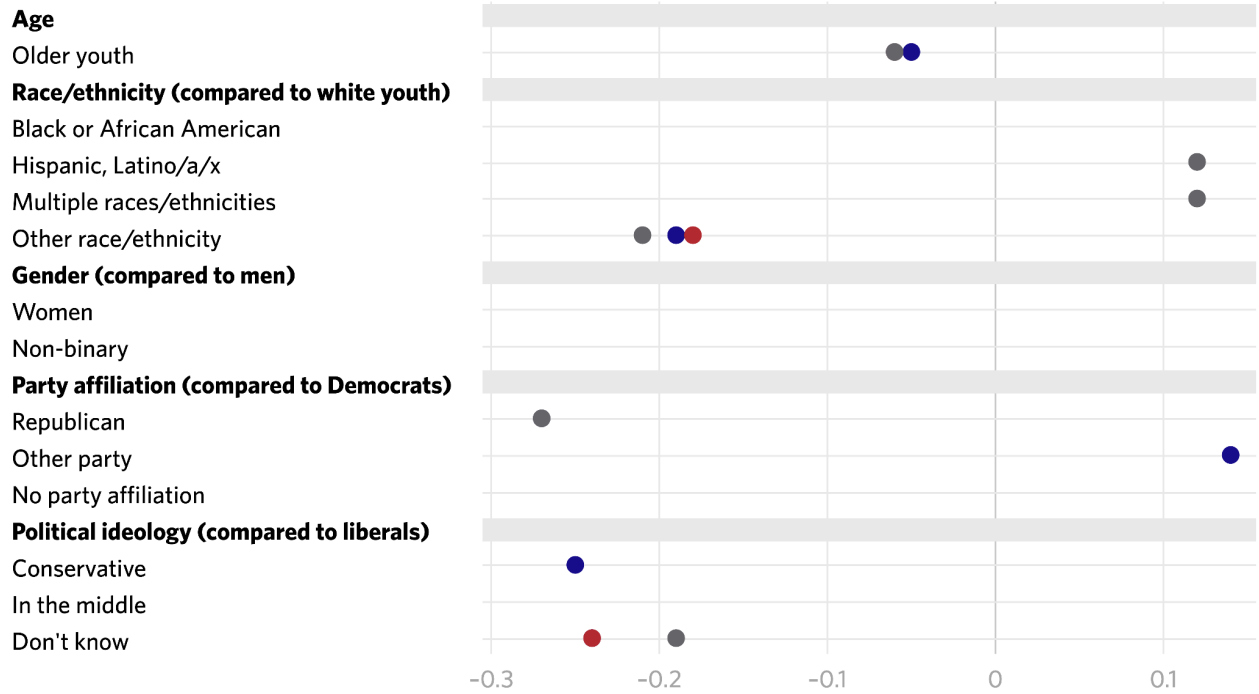
When we break that down further, our findings provide some other potential explanations for different levels of action among different groups of youth:

- Young people of color are more likely than white youth to say they feel comfortable trying to engage their friends, family, and community members in climate action, which may explain why these youth are more likely to plan or attend school/community events where these groups may be involved as organizers or participants.
- On the other hand, young people in the “other” racial category are much less likely to say they feel comfortable engaging with government officials, which may explain why these youth are less likely to sign a petition.
- Conservative and Republican youth, as well as those who say they “don’t know” their political ideology, feel less comfortable contacting stakeholders across the board: from their own peers to people in government. That could suggest a level of discomfort talking to other young people who may be less likely to share their views, or a lack of connection with traditional activism and organizing that could have given them the strategies and experience to approach different audiences.

● Friends from school ● Family members ● Neighbors and other local community members



● People in government at the local level ● People in government at the state level ● People in government at the federal level

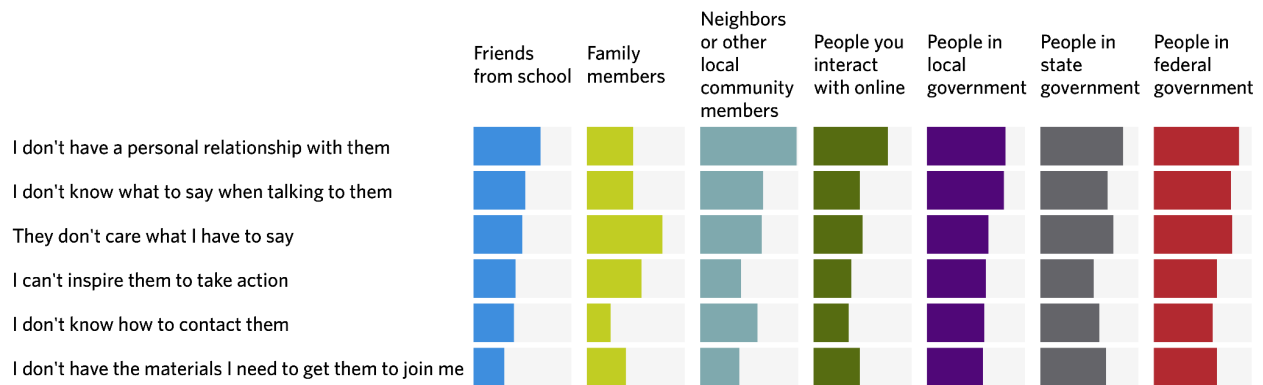




We also asked youth who were uncomfortable trying to engage various stakeholders about some of the reasons for that discomfort. Overall, young people were most likely to cite a lack of personal connection, not knowing what to say, and not believing that these various groups of people cared about what they had to say.

### What are some obstacles that stop you from getting [group] to help you solve climate and environmental issues?

The number of youth who selected each response  
 Youth could select more than one answer  
 Only youth who indicated that they were "definitely not" comfortable getting the group to help them were asked this question



These findings about differential levels of comfort, and about the reasons for discomfort, provide a roadmap for organizations who want to increase their young members' ability to take action. By tapping into young people's strengths and, especially, by providing specific resources, training, and other support to mitigate these sources of discomfort, climate- and environmental-focused groups can further improve young people's readiness, efficacy, and motivation to engage.

### Reaching Rural and Suburban Youth

One other major challenge to broader engagement of young people in climate action is geographical. Our survey included youth who had engaged with ACE or had seen an ad to take climate action with ACE, and we used participants' zip codes to determine the population density of the county in which they lived ([USDA, 2013](#)). We found that a majority of participants (76%) lived in urban areas, and 67% lived in metro areas with a population of 1 million or more. Only 5% of youth in our sample lived in suburban areas, and less than 1% in rural areas. (The remaining 18% of youth had missing or incorrect zip codes and their area could not be determined.)

This may align with the findings above which suggest that some youth need more support or a different type of entry point to climate action. Additionally, CIRCLE's nationally representative 2020 pre-election survey shows youth in areas with lower population density are less likely to put climate and the environment in their top 3 issues. However, that same survey shows that youth in less dense areas who did put climate and the environment in their top 3 issues were much more

likely to have participated in civic life before. Previous CIRCLE research has examined the challenges to civic engagement faced by rural youth, many of whom live in what they consider to be [“civic deserts”](#) with fewer opportunities and resources for institutional civic engagement.

This study suggests that online ads and other recruitment methods used by organizations like ACE are not reaching many youth outside of high-population urban areas. This is a key lesson for organizations that want to diversify their outreach and contribute to providing access and opportunities for young people in different parts of the country.

## **Opportunities for Growth: Meeting the Challenges and Adopting New Strategies**

The findings outlined in the previous section offer some insights into what organizations can do to increase and diversify their active members, and to improve those members’ ability to take action.

### **Pathways to Engagement and Skill-Building for Different Youth**

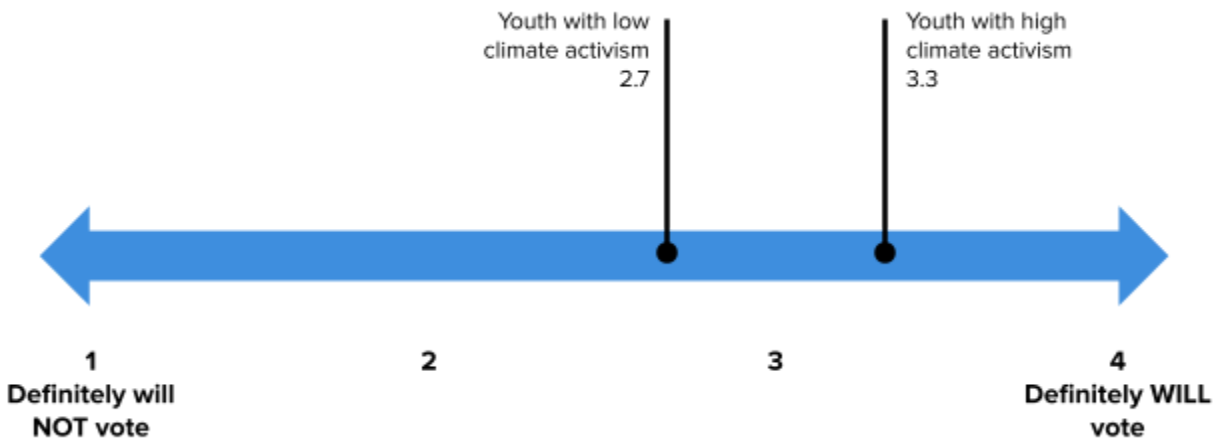
A key consideration and strategy in youth civic engagement work is meeting young people where they are and creating varied pathways to participation that take into account those diverse starting points. As explored above, for young people of color who rate their readiness, efficacy, and motivation similarly to their peers but still participate at lower rates, that may mean leveraging their higher level of comfort talking to their personal networks, and the communal, peer-centered aspects of attending and planning events.

Among other groups of youth who are taking comparatively fewer actions, like young men, young conservatives, or youth unsure about their political ideology, focusing on opportunities to develop various strengths and enhancing their comfort level in speaking about climate may be important. That’s especially the case because, according to our survey, young people are highly interested in acquiring new skills like advocacy, presenting information, having discussions with other people, and identifying key stakeholders. Creating these skill-building opportunities and targeting them at the youth who need them most is a critical strategy.

### **Connections to the 2022 Election and Voter Engagement**

Election cycles provide valuable opportunities to draw direct connections for youth between the issues they care about and the politicians and policies on the ballot. That connection can work both ways: as a pathway for youth who are engaged in electoral politics to also engage in climate action, and as an opportunity for young people who care about the climate or other issues to vote or otherwise participate in the political process.

Our survey asked youth (here, ages 18-25, to account for voter eligibility) about their likelihood to vote in the 2022 midterm elections. We found that, on a scale from 1 (definitely will not vote) to 4 (definitely will vote), young people who had taken an above-average number of climate actions in the past year said they were more likely to vote than youth who took few climate actions. Notably, this relationship holds for youth who are not affiliated with a political party, a segment of the electorate often ignored by political campaigns that, if reached out to, may be ready to vote to effect change on issues like climate.



The positive relationship between climate activism and likelihood to vote also suggests opportunities to [grow voters](#) even among youth who have not yet turned 18. Just as many report doing about climate, young people who haven't reached voting age can talk to their friends and family about political issues, post online about the election, and support their older peers with registration. For campaigns and organizations, this may mean there is a segment of the future electorate eager to pre-register to vote and to work on campaigns, especially engaging their peers within issue organizing spaces.

## Scenarios Offer Insights Into What Motivates Youth

Climate organizations and other issue-focused groups should also consider the messages and situations that resonate most with youth. To test that, we presented the young respondents in our survey with four hypothetical environmental-related scenarios and asked about how each shaped their desire to participate in climate action:

- "A toxic chemical spill happened in your local area, polluting waterways"
- "There is a severe heat wave across the entire country"
- "A law is proposed that will prevent residents in your area from being able to add solar power to their homes"
- "A new major oil pipeline is about to be built and Congress is not doing anything to stop this"

We measured responses to these scenarios between the relatively more engaged youth in our survey (who have taken more climate actions) and the youth not yet engaged in action. While, as expected, the more engaged youth said they were more likely to take action based on all four scenarios, the latter were still likely to say they would engage. The scenarios related to a chemical spill and a heat wave were the most likely to motivate all youth to act.

It may be that those two scenarios “hit home” for young people who can more easily imagine the impact on their lives, compared to the more policy-focused scenarios related to legislation and Congressional approval of a pipeline. It may also be that the latter two, where action would likely involve contacting elected officials, are less motivating for youth who (as we have described) feel less comfortable contacting people in government. We believe there are potential lessons here in how organizations can frame climate issues in ways that will spur young people to action. Individuals already invested in our movement can be motivated by a range of messages, while event-related scenarios can be more effective for unengaged youth. Focusing on localized stories was effective, which may be a good rule of thumb when identifying stories to highlight.

## **Implications and Future Directions**

Results from this survey have a number of implications for organizations working with young people on climate activism and civic engagement. This work is not without its limitations. More evidence-based work should be devoted to learning more about engaging and mobilizing right-leaning, moderate, and rural youth, though we learned a number of ways we can continue to support and grow engagement.

We learned that younger participants (those under the age of 19) tend to be more engaged, affirming the focus of ACE and CIRCLE on youth. Many of these participants are still enrolled in high school, so efforts should continue to leverage peer support from educational institutions. We learned that women and non-binary youth are engaged in climate activism, so continuing to provide opportunities and entry points for these groups is important to diversifying who is engaged. To further engage youth of color, we should build upon their already high participation in event planning, perhaps leveraging events or incorporating the relational aspect of events in more climate actions.

We learned there is an openness to engaging with family and friends on climate issues. Developing skills through training and mentorship opportunities can foster comfort with having those conversations. This could include providing tailored talking points and strategies for dealing with resistance and conflict. We also learned the important connection between climate actions and voting behavior. Continuing to invest in climate activism, in particular for those not yet eligible to vote, can be important to subsequent civic engagement.



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