

THE 100 MILLION PROJECT

**College Students,  
Voting and the  
COVID-19 Election**

A College Pulse & Knight Foundation Study



COLLEGE PULSE



KNIGHT  
FOUNDATION

September 2020

[the100million.org](http://the100million.org)

# College Students, Voting and the COVID-19 Election

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# About Us

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## About COLLEGE PULSE

College Pulse is a survey research and analytics company dedicated to understanding the attitudes, preferences and behaviors of today's college students. College Pulse offers custom data-driven marketing and research solutions, utilizing its unique *American College Student Panel™* that includes over 400,000 undergraduate college student respondents from more than 1,000 two- and four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states.

For more information, visit <https://collegepulse.com/> or College Pulse's official Twitter account [@Collegelnsights](#).

## About THE JOHN S. AND JAMES L. KNIGHT FOUNDATION

Knight Foundation is a national foundation with strong local roots. We invest in journalism, in the arts, and in the success of cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. Our goal is to foster informed and engaged communities, which we believe are essential for a healthy democracy.

For more information, visit [kf.org](http://kf.org) or follow us [@knightfdn](#) on Twitter.

# Executive Summary

College students demonstrated some of the most dramatic surges in voter turnout for the 2018 midterm election of any voter group, prompting high expectations for their presence at the polls in 2020.

Earlier this year, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation released the 100 Million Project, a landmark study that surveyed 12,000 persistent nonvoters in order to explore the underlying challenges of electoral participation. Alarming findings showed the emerging electorate— 18-to-24-year-old eligible citizens, many of whom were registered or had voted before—were far less interested in voting for president in 2020 even than chronic non-voters. Young people also had the least interest in politics, felt the least informed, and struggled the most with the voting process.

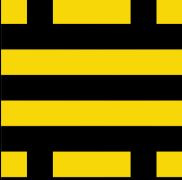
But this was before COVID-19 hit upended the college experience and created the potential for a disrupted 2020 election. It was also before the police killing of George Floyd triggered protests and a national discussion of systemic racism that sharpened partisan divides.

Knight commissioned College Pulse to undertake a national poll of college student views on voting and the 2020 election, to gage their responses to voting during these unprecedented and uncertain times. Conducted from August 9 to 12, 2020, findings from “College Students, Voting and the COVID-19 Election” represent a sample of 4,000 full-time students currently enrolled in four-year degree programs surveyed via the College Pulse mobile app and web portal, and weighted to be nationally representative.

Key takeaways include:

- **Most students—led by college women and Democrats—say they are “absolutely certain” they will vote this year.** About seven in 10 (71%) students say they are absolutely certain they will vote in the upcoming election, with female students expressing greater certainty than their male counterparts by a margin of 10 points. Students who identify as Democrat are the most likely to be absolutely certain they will vote (81%), followed by Republicans (74%) and Independents (63%).
- **Students lack confidence in the legitimacy of the 2020 election.** Nearly half (49%) say it won’t be fair and open, and a majority (55%) say it will not be administered well. A full 81% say special interest groups have more influence over election outcomes than voters.
- **Students are likely to doubt the results of the presidential election.** Half say that problems at polling places such as long lines or broken voting machines would lead them to have major doubts about the fairness of the election; followed by evidence of foreign interference (48%); the election winner losing the popular vote (46%); and low voter turnout (46%) or if most voters cast ballots by mail (31%). And 74% will have major or minor doubts about the fairness of the election if it takes weeks to count.



- 
- **Students plan to vote for Joe Biden by a wide margin, but enthusiasm is low for both major candidates and their parties.** A full 70% say they will vote for Biden, versus only 18% for President Trump. But only 49% have a favorable impression of Biden, versus 51% unfavorable; for Trump, those numbers are 19% and 81%, respectively. When it comes to the two major parties, male college students view both about equally negatively, while female students express much more positive views of the Democratic Party.
  - **Just over half of college students plan to vote by mail, with large partisan splits.** The majority (63%) of Democratic students say they would prefer to vote by mail or absentee, compared to 31% of Republican students. Thirty nine percent of all students plan to vote in person.

The report, “College Students, Voting and the COVID-19 Election,” details the full findings on these and other issues related to the 2020 election and political participation among the rising generation of college-educated Americans—including notable breakout data by gender, party affiliation and race. College students' responses reveal a polarized student body that's unified in its skepticism of the electoral system, the candidates, and the idea that the government works to improve their lives. But most of them are still largely intent on casting a ballot in 2020.

# I. Political Priorities in the 2020 Election

## Few Students are Following the Election Very Closely, but Most Say They Will Vote

At this stage in the 2020 presidential campaign more than seven in ten (72 percent) college students say they are following news about the election. However, only about one-quarter (27 percent) say they are tracking news about the presidential very closely. Nearly three in ten (28 percent) say they are not following election news closely.

When it comes to interest in the 2020 presidential election differences are fairly modest between students. At least one-quarter of black (25 percent) and white students (29 percent) report following election news very closely while fewer than one in four Hispanic (22 percent) and Asian students (18 percent) say the same. There is a notable gender gap in reported interest in the presidential election. Thirty-two percent of male students say they are following news about the election very closely compared to 22 percent of female students.

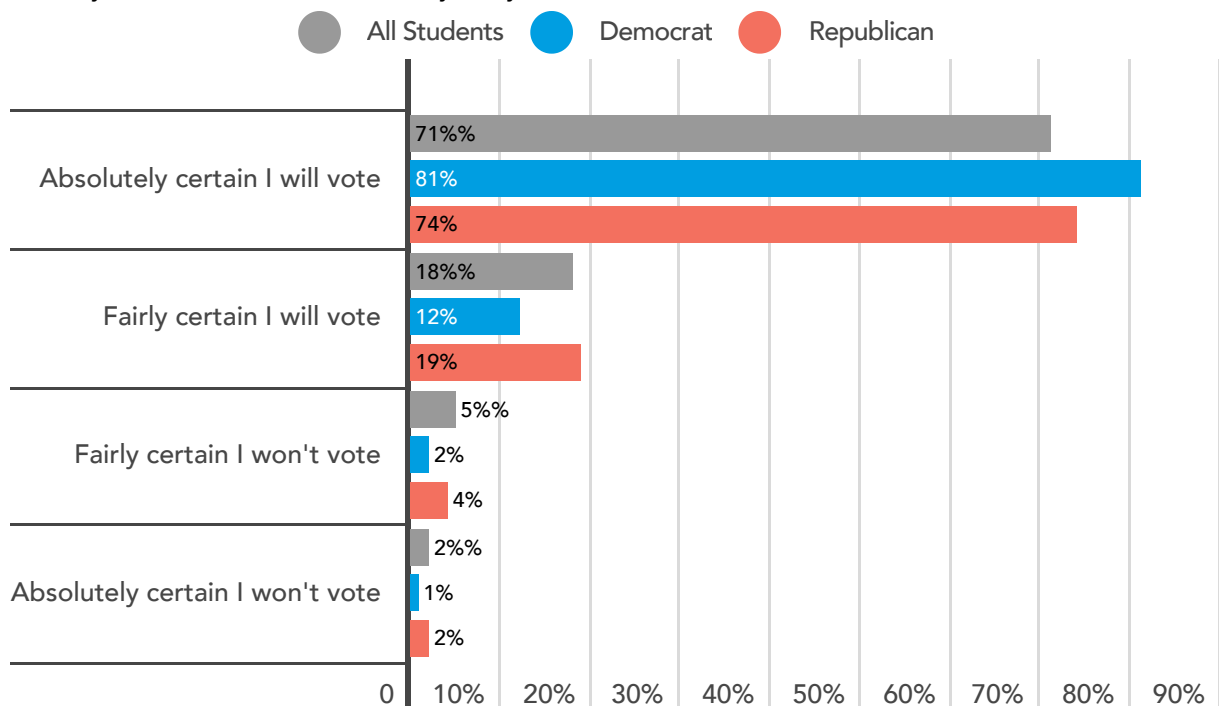
Even if most college students are not following the election closely at this stage, most students say they are “absolutely certain” they will vote this year. Approximately seven in ten (71 percent) students say they are absolutely certain in their plan to vote in the upcoming election. About one in three (29 percent) students are less certain that they will vote. Despite the expressed enthusiasm to vote, actual voting rates for students in recent elections have been considerably lower. A study of college student voting habits found that less than half (48 percent) of all students cast a ballot in the 2016 election. [1]

Consistent with other findings about women’s political engagement, college women in this study report following the news about the upcoming less closely than their male counterparts, although they express greater certainty that they will vote, also consistent with actual voting participation. Three-quarters (75 percent) of female students report being “absolutely certain” that they will vote in November while 65 percent of male students say the same.

Democratic students express greater certainty about voting than Republican students. More than eight in ten (81 percent) Democratic students report being absolutely certain they will vote in the November election compared to 74 percent of Republican students and 63 percent of political independents.

### Democratic Students are More Likely to Vote

How would you describe the level of certainty that you will vote in November of 2020?



[1] [https://idhe.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/NSLVE%20Report%202012-2016\\_1.pdf](https://idhe.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/NSLVE%20Report%202012-2016_1.pdf)

## In the 2020 Election Joe Biden is Favored over Donald Trump, But Few Students Express Enthusiasm for the Democratic Nominee

Reflecting the strong Democratic leanings on college campuses and pronounced negative feelings of Donald Trump, Joe Biden is strongly favored by students. Seventy percent of students who are currently registered to vote say they would support Joe Biden if the election were held today. Only 18 percent report that they would be supporting Donald Trump. One in ten (10 percent) students registered to vote report favoring a third party candidate while three percent say they would not vote. [2]

There is a wide gender gap in candidate preferences on campus. More than three-quarters (77 percent) of female student voters say they would vote for Biden compared to 57 percent of male student voters.

Although gender gaps in candidate preferences are evident across lines of race and ethnicity the starkest divide emerges among white students. Less than half (46 percent) of white male students say they would vote for Biden while 70 percent of white female students say the same. Majorities of black male and female students (69 percent vs. 86 percent), Hispanic male and female students (65 percent vs. 75 percent) and Asian male and female students (63 percent vs. 84 percent) report that they are currently supporting Biden.

### Students Overwhelmingly Dislike Trump, but Biden Fares Only Somewhat Better

If you were to cast your vote today, for whom would you vote?

		Joe Biden	Donald Trump	Someone else	Would Not Vote
	ALL	70%	18%	10%	3%
Female	White	70%	20%	6%	4%
	Asian	84%	6%	2%	8%
	Black	86%	2%	7%	5%
	Hispanic	75%	10%	7%	8%
Male	White	46%	34%	13%	7%
	Asian	63%	13%	11%	14%
	Black	69%	18%	9%	4%
	Hispanic	65%	18%	7%	10%

[2] The survey was conducted before the announcement that Kamala Harris would be Biden's running mate and reflects voting preferences at that time.

Joe Biden's lead among students is almost certainly driven in part by the strong aversion to Donald Trump that most students feel. Less than one in five (19 percent) students have a favorable view of Trump. Eighty-one percent of students express an unfavorable opinion of the president including more than two-thirds (68 percent) who have a very unfavorable view.

Views about Joe Biden are much more positive, but the Democratic nominee is hardly universally admired by college students. Less than half (49 percent) of students have a favorable impression of Biden while about as many (51 percent) say their views are negative.

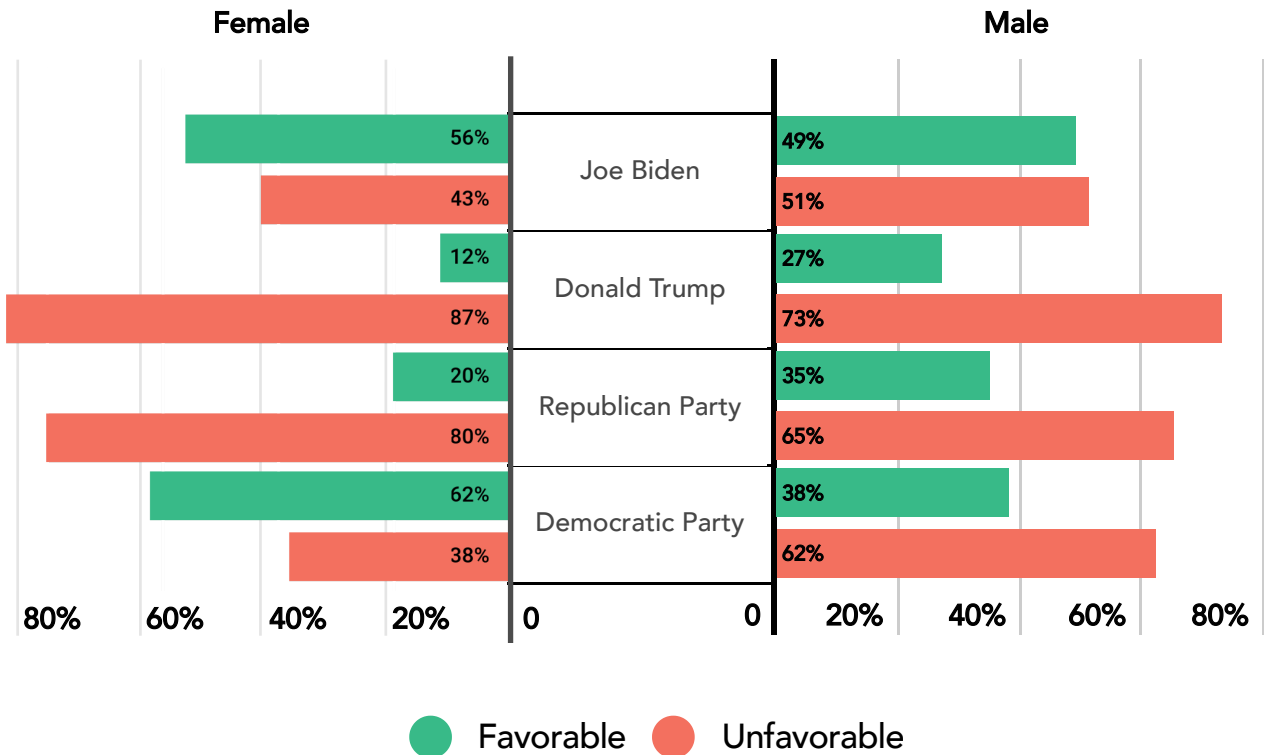
Biden fares much better among female students than male students. A majority (56 percent) of female students have a favorable view of Biden while only 40 percent of male students express a positive view of the Democratic nominee. Sixty percent of male college students have a negative view of Biden including 30 percent who have a very unfavorable opinion of him. Importantly, more than one in five (22 percent) college students express a negative view of both presidential candidates.

College students express more positive views of the Democratic Party than the Republican Party. However, there are sharp divisions in views of the parties along lines of gender, race and ethnicity. More than half (51 percent) of students say they have a favorable opinion of the Democratic Party with about as many (49 percent) expressing a negative opinion. About half as many (26 percent) students report a positive opinion of the Republican Party. Roughly three-quarters (76 percent) of students view the GOP unfavorably.

Notably, male college students view the Republican and Democratic Party about equally negatively while female students express much more positive views of the Democratic Party. More than six in ten male students have an unfavorable view of the Democratic Party (63 percent) and the Republican Party (65 percent). Among female students, views diverge sharply in sentiment around the two major political parties. Eighty percent of female students view the Republican Party unfavorably; roughly half as many (38 percent) have a negative opinion of the Democratic Party. More than six in ten (62 percent) female students view the Democratic Party favorably.

**Students Overwhelmingly Dislike Trump, But Biden Fares Only Somewhat Better**

All in all, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of....



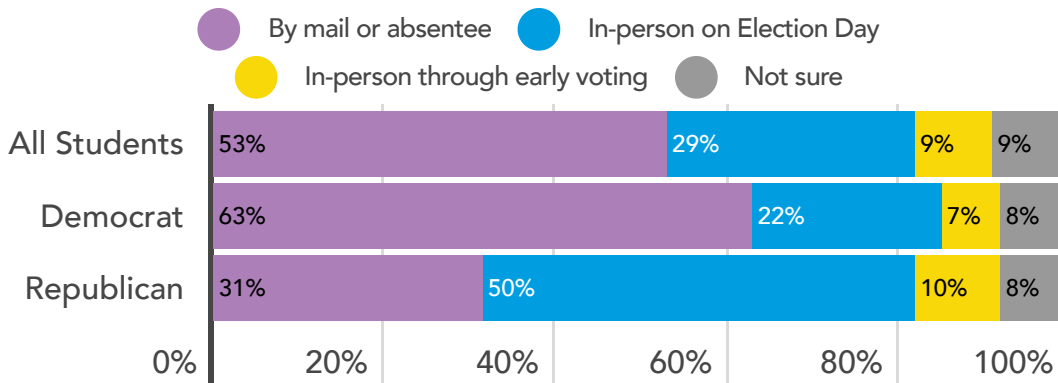
## How Will Students Vote and How Difficult Do They Think it Will Be?

Perhaps driven in part by the uncertainty surrounding whether colleges will host students on campus or operate remotely in the fall, most students say they are planning on voting by mail. Fifty three percent of students say they plan on voting by mail. About four in ten say they are going to vote in-person on Election Day (29 percent) or through early voting (9 percent). Ten percent of students report that they are not certain how they would vote.

When it comes to voting by mail there is a yawning divide in the stated plans of Democratic and Republican students. Sixty-three percent of Democratic students say they would prefer to vote by mail or absentee while only 31 percent of Republican students say they plan on voting by mail.

### Democratic Students Far More Likely to say They Will Vote By Mail

How are you planning on casting your vote this year?

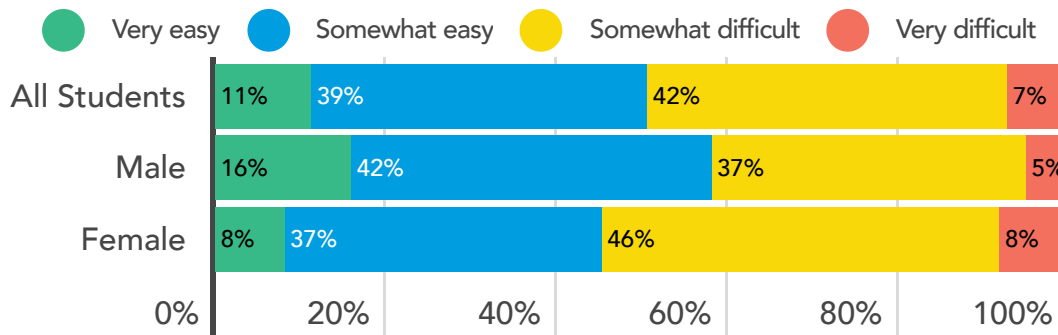


Although students express a good deal of confidence that they will vote, many do not think the process will be easy. Only about half (51 percent) of students say they expect the process of voting in the presidential election to be somewhat or very easy. Roughly as many (49 percent) say the act of voting is likely to be at least somewhat difficult.

The perceptions of male and female students differ markedly. About six in ten (58 percent) of male students expect the voting process to be at least somewhat easy while fewer than half (46 percent) of female students expect it to be an easy process. A majority (54 percent) of female students expect to find the process of voting this year to be difficult.

### Male Students Far More Likely To Believe Voting Will Be Easy

Overall, do you personally expect voting in the November presidential election to be...



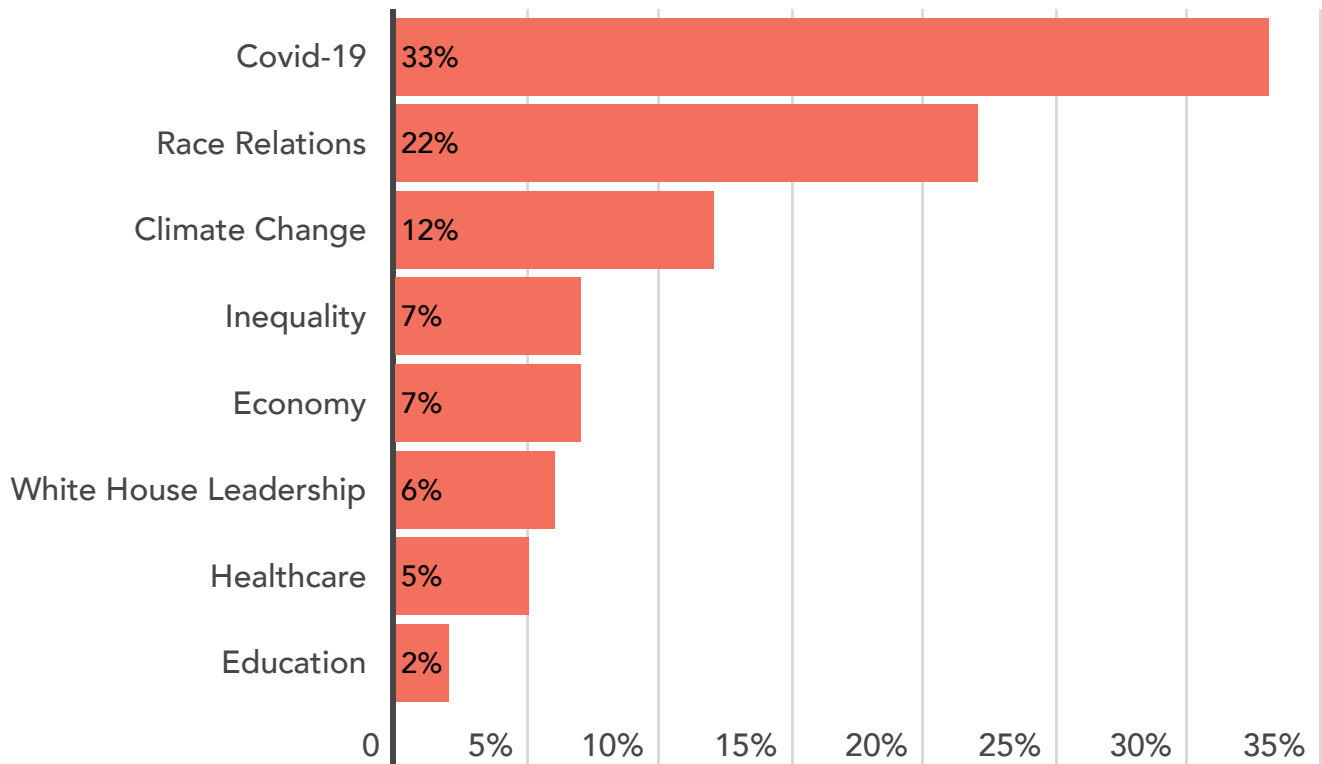
There are modest racial disparities in perceptions of voting difficulty among students. A majority (54 percent) of white students believe voting will personally be at least somewhat easy compared to less than half of black (48 percent), Hispanic (45 percent), and Asian students (41 percent).

### A Covid-19 Election?

Even as Covid-19 represents a less serious health threat to young people, the pandemic has wreaked havoc on the finances of young people and their families and disrupted the lives of millions of students prevented from returning to campus this fall. When asked what is the most important issue facing the country today, Covid-19 topped all other issues by a wide margin. Nearly one in three (33 percent) students offer that the coronavirus pandemic is the most serious issue facing the country today. In contrast, less than one quarter (22 percent) of students mentioned racial inequality, police mistreatment of black Americans or racism. Even fewer (12 percent) students say climate change or environmental issues represent the country's most pressing concerns. The concern about coronavirus is supported by students' contact with others who have tested positively for COVID-19. 67% of college students reported that they personally knew someone who had tested positively for COVID-19, and 8% report that someone in their own household who has had Covid-19.

### Most Important Issue to Students

What do you believe is the most important issue currently facing the United States today? (open response)



## II. Student Confidence in the Election

The upcoming 2020 election has not inspired an abundant feeling of confidence among college students. Less than half (45 percent) of students believe the fall election will be administered at least somewhat well—only seven percent say very well. A majority (55 percent) of college students say the November election will be administered not too or not at all well.

Assessments about whether the election will be administered vary significantly by gender, with men being more confident that the election will be well-run. Half of men compared to approximately four in ten (41 percent) college women say the election will be run at least somewhat well.

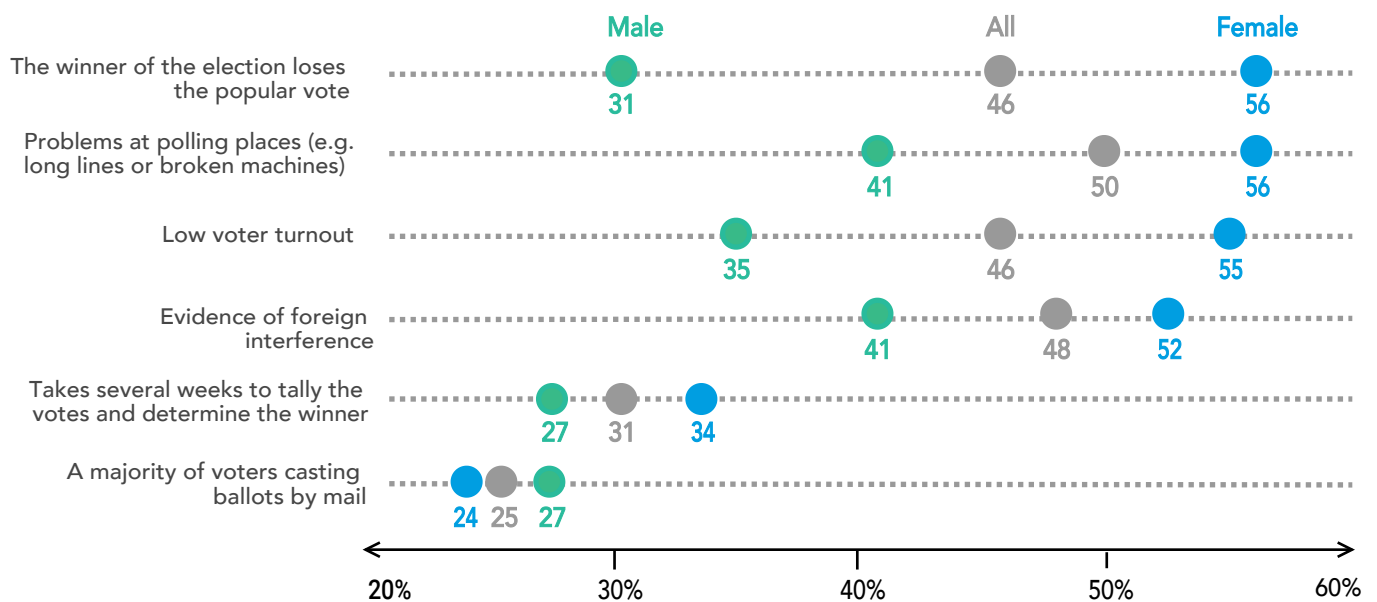
Students are somewhat more divided over whether the presidential election will be conducted in a way that is fair and open. Half of students (50 percent) say it is at least somewhat likely the presidential contest will be conducted in a manner that is transparent and above board while about as many (49 percent) say this is not too or not at all likely.

Compared to female students, male students express greater confidence that the election will be fair and open. A majority (58 percent) of male students say it is at least somewhat likely the presidential election will be conducted in a fair and open manner. Less than half (46 percent) of female students feel the same.

A number of different factors may be responsible for instilling doubts among students about the equitable and open nature of U.S. elections. Students report that a number of electoral difficulties and problems would cause them to doubt the fairness of the 2020 presidential. Half (50 percent) of all students say that problems at polling places such as long lines or broken voting machines would cause them to have major doubts that the election was run fairly. Similar numbers of students report that evidence of foreign interference (48 percent), the election winner losing the popular vote (46 percent), and low voter turnout (46 percent) would lead them to have major doubts about the fairness of the election. Fewer students say their confidence about the fairness of the election would be shaken if most voters cast ballots by mail (31 percent) or if it took several weeks to tally all the votes (26 percent).

### Confidence In Election Fairness Likely To Be Undermined Due To Election Problems

Percentage of students who say the following would lead them to have major doubts about the fairness of the election



Concerns over the validity of the upcoming election vary considerably by gender. For example, female students are much more likely than male students to say problems at polling places would lead them to have major doubts whether the election was administered fairly (56 percent vs. 41 percent, respectively). There is an even larger gender gap over the issue of low voter turnout. A majority (55 percent) of female students say an election with low turnout would cause them to have major doubts about fairness of the electoral process. Only 35 percent of male students say a low-turnout election would lead them to have these kinds of doubts.

A sizable racial gap is evident as well. Black students are more likely to say that long lines at polling places would lead to major doubts about the equitable nature of the election (63 percent) compared to white students (46 percent). Black students are also much more likely than other students to say that the election winner losing the national popular vote would undercut their confidence in the election. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of black students say they would have major doubts if the ultimate winner of the election did not capture a majority of votes. Only 40 percent of white students share this perspective.

There are striking partisan differences in the assessment of the fairness of the election when it comes to voting by mail. For students who self-identify as Republican, a majority (57 percent) would have major doubts about the election's fairness if the majority of votes were cast by mail, compared to only 17 percent of Democratic students.

In contrast, Democratic students are far more likely to say their confidence in the election would be undermined by foreign interference, low voter turnout, a discrepancy between the electoral college and national vote winner and problems at polling places. Significantly more Democratic students than Republican students say they would have major doubts about the validity of the election if the winner of the popular vote still lost (62 percent vs. 10 percent), there was evidence of foreign interference (59 percent vs. 31 percent), there were problems at polling places such as long lines or broken machines (62 percent vs. 24 percent), or low voter turnout (61 percent vs. 18 percent).



### III. Political Activism On and Off Campus

By far the most common political activity college students engage in is posting a political opinion online. Forty three percent of students report having contributed to an online discussion or forum by posting their opinion in the last 12 months. Substantially fewer students—approximately one in four—report having donated money to a candidate or cause (27 percent), attended a rally, march or protest (26 percent) or contacted an elected official (25 percent). Only about one in five students say they wore a piece of clothing with a political message (21 percent) or displayed signs in their dorm or home supporting a political cause or campaign (18 percent).

Past research has shown that men report higher rates of political involvement than women across a range of different activities, from donating to participating in political discussions.<sup>[3]</sup> Among college students this pattern is reversed. Female college students report modest, but consistently higher levels of political activity. Compared to their male classmates, female students in the last 12 months are more likely to have shared a political opinion online (47 percent vs. 37 percent), contacted an elected official (29 percent vs. 20 percent), or to have attended a protest, march or rally (29 percent vs. 20 percent).

Up to this point, Democratic students are reporting much higher rates of political activism than Republican students. Nearly half (49 percent) of Democratic students report having made a contribution to an online discussion advocating for a political position in the last 12 months while only 31 percent of Republican students report having done the same. Democratic students are more than twice as likely as Republican students to have donated money to a political cause or candidate (37 percent vs. 15 percent). More than one-third (35 percent) of Democratic students report having attended a march, protest or rally in the last 12 months, an activity that is far less common among Republican students. Only six percent of Republican students report having participated in a march or protest. Democratic students are also twice as likely as Republican students to have contacted an elected official (31 percent vs. 15 percent). Democratic and Republican students are about equally as likely to have worn clothing with a political message or to have displayed a political sign in their home.

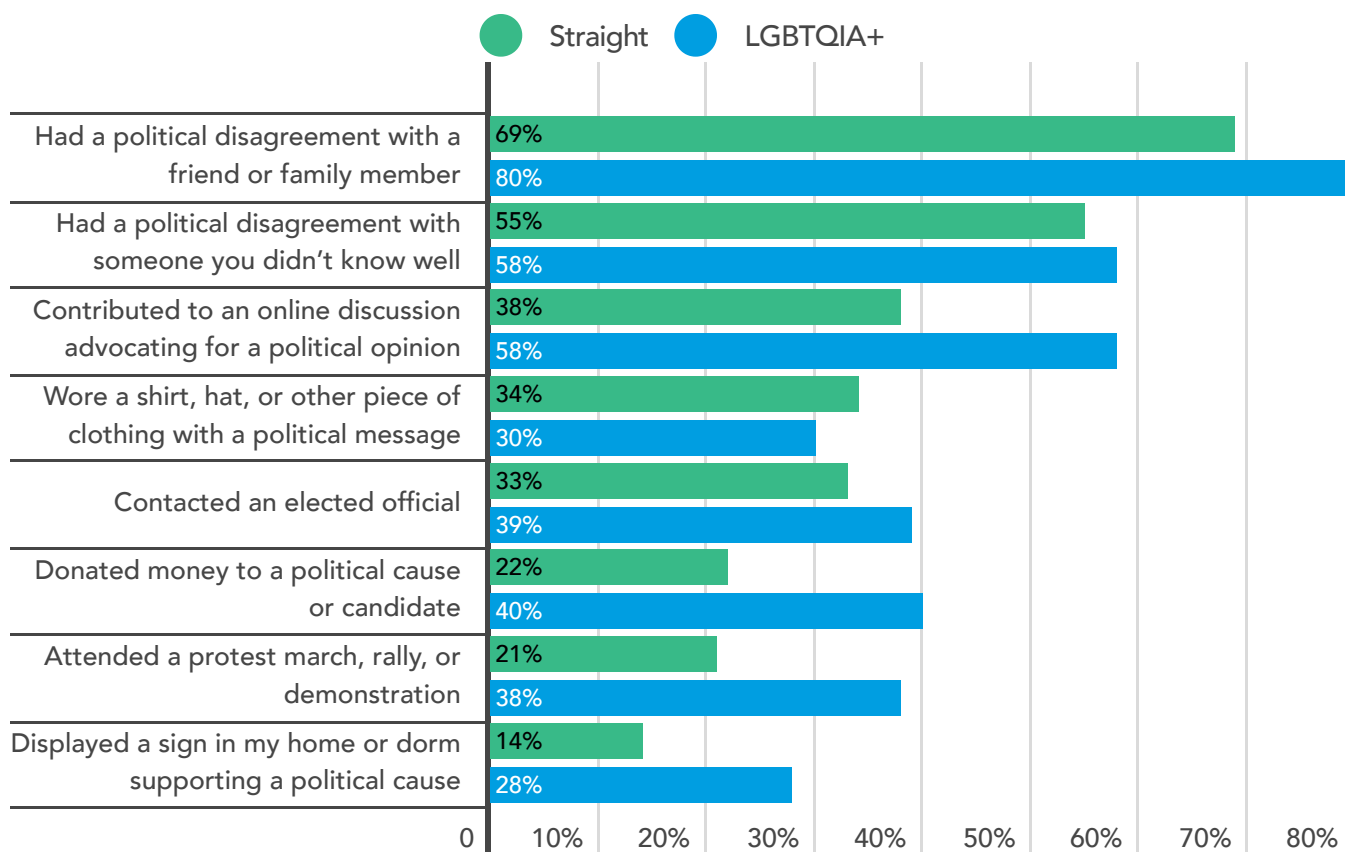
[3] In *Politics is for Power*, Eitan Hersh finds that men know more facts about politics, report spending more time following political news and report greater interest in political topics.

## LGBTQIA+ Activism

Students who identify as LGBTQIA+, a group that comprises 25 percent of the college student population, exhibit much higher rates of political activism than heterosexual students across a range of political activities. LGBTQIA+ students are about twice as likely to have donated money to a political cause or candidate in the last 12 months (40 percent vs. 22 percent). Compared to heterosexual or straight students, LGBTQ+ students are also far more likely to have attended a rally, protest or march (38 percent vs. 21 percent), or to have contacted an elected official (38 percent vs. 21 percent). LGBTQIA+ students are also significantly more likely to have displayed a sign in their home or dorm supporting a political cause or campaign (27 percent vs. 14 percent).

### LGBTQIA+ Students Are Far More Politically Active

Please indicate if you have done each of the following activities in the last 12 months or not.



### Political Disagreements among Students Common, Particularly for Some

Political disagreements are fairly common among college students, although those occurring among friends or family members are more common than with strangers. More than seven in ten (72 percent) students say they have had a political disagreement with a family member or friend in the last 12 months. Less than half (46 percent) say they have had a disagreement with someone they did not know well over the same time period.

White students are much more likely than students of color to get into political disagreements with those who they know well and those who they do not. Seventy-nine percent of white students say they have had a political disagreement with a friend or family member, an experience that was less common among Hispanic (65 percent), black (59 percent) and Asian students (59 percent). Half of white students say they have had a political disagreement with a friend or family member, an experience that was less common among

Hispanic (65 percent), black (59 percent) and Asian students (59 percent). Half of white students say they have had a political dispute with someone they did not know well in the last 12 months. Nearly half (46 percent) of black students, 41 percent of Hispanic students and only 32 percent of Asian students report having had this experience in the last 12 months.

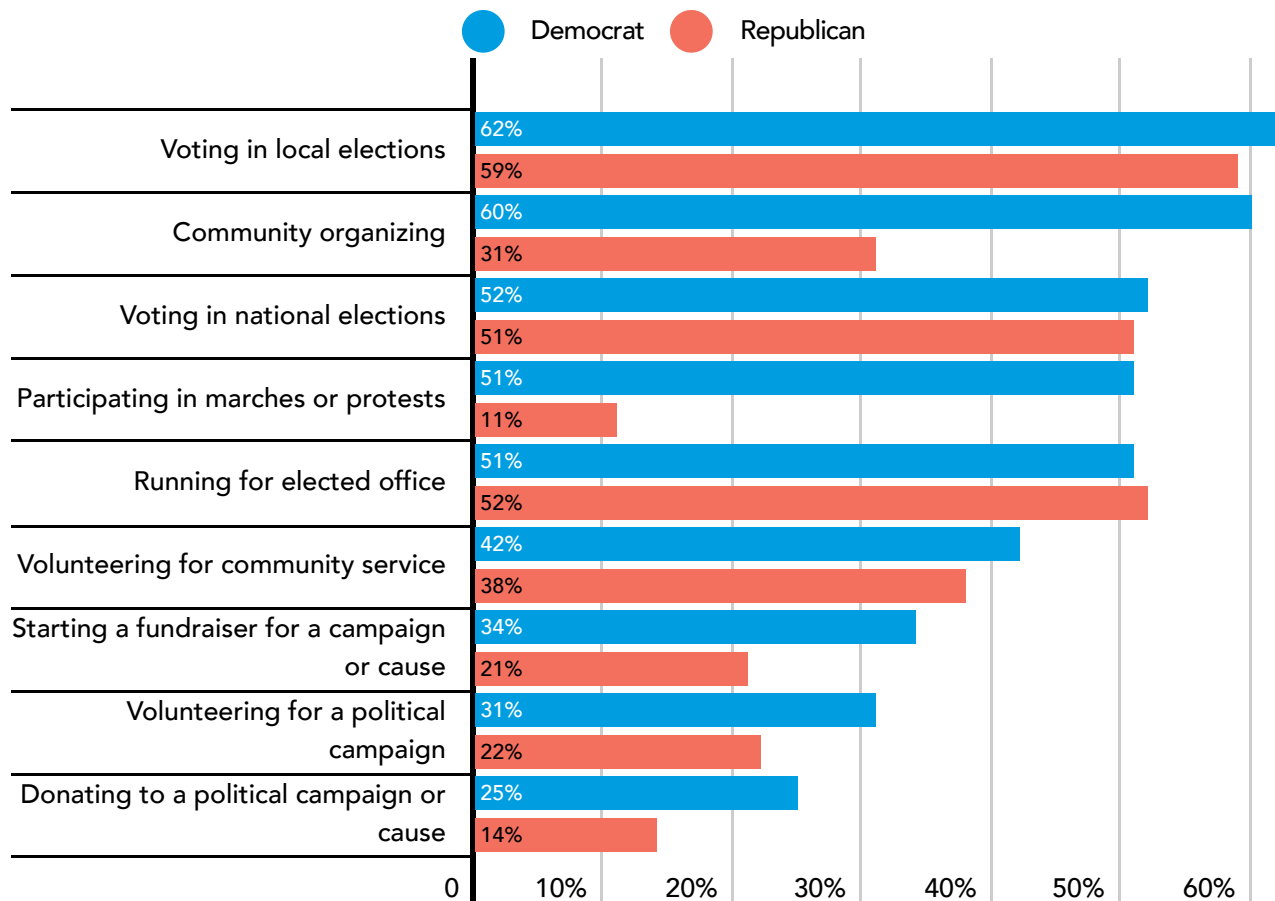
Notably, LGBTQIA+ students experience and engage in political disagreements at far greater frequency than straight or heterosexual students. Nearly eight in ten (79 percent) LGBTQIA+ students report having a political disagreement with a friend or family member in the last 12 months. Nearly six in ten (58 percent) LGBTQIA+ students say they have gotten into an argument over politics with someone they did not know well. Less than half (42 percent) of straight students report having a political disagreement with someone they did not know well.

### Most Students Say Local Politics is the Best Way to Make a Difference

When it comes to making progress on the issues they care about college students believe that local political engagement is the best method to achieve results. Although participation in local elections is extremely low among students, a majority say that voting in local elections is one of the most effective ways to make a difference on the issues they care about. Half (50 percent) of students say running for elected office is one of the most effective things they can do while an identical number (50 percent) say community organizing is an activity that is one of the most effective. Less than half of students cite voting in national elections (44 percent), volunteering for community service (41 percent), participating in marches or protests (38 percent), or starting a fundraiser for a campaign or cause (38 percent). Less than one in four students say volunteering for a political campaign (24 percent) or donating to a political campaign or cause (19 percent) is one of the most effective things they can do to make a difference.

### Democrats and Republican Students Alike Believe in Efficacy of Local Politics

Percent of students who say the following is one of the most effective ways to make progress on issues they care about.



There is broad agreement among students about the relative efficacy of these activities with two important exceptions. Students strongly disagree about the effectiveness of political protests and community organizing. Nearly half of female students say participating in marches or protests is one of the most effective ways to make a change while only 26 percent of male students agree. Black students are also much more likely than other students to believe in the efficacy of protests. More than half (53 percent) of black students say getting involved in a protest or march is one of the best ways to make a difference. Significantly fewer Hispanic (42 percent), Asian (34 percent) and white students (34 percent) agree.

Democratic students are about five times more likely than Republican students to say political protests are effective. More than half (51 percent) of Democratic students say participating in a march is one of the most effective types of activism. Only 11 percent of Republican students say the same.

Community organizing also sharply divides students. A majority (53 percent) of female students believe community organizing is one of the most effective ways they can make a difference compared to 43 percent of male students. Black students are also much more likely to believe in the efficacy of community organizing. More than six in ten (62 percent) black students see community organizing as one of the most effective methods, a view shared by considerably fewer Hispanic (54 percent), white (47 percent) and Asian students (47 percent).

There is a wide partisan gap as well. Democratic students are about twice as likely as Republican students to say community organizing is one of the most effective ways to bring about change on the issues they care about (60 percent vs. 31 percent).

### **Lack of Knowledge Rather than Disinterest an Impediment to Political Involvement**

In general, college students express a good deal of cynicism about the way government works and pessimism about how well the voting process represents the true interests of the voters. Only 39 percent of students agree that the federal government works to improve the lives of people like them. Most students reject the idea. There is also a widespread belief that special interests have too much influence over the electoral process. More than eight in ten (81 percent) students say special interest groups have more influence over election outcomes than voters.

However, when it comes to political involvement students are more likely to cite a lack of practical information over interest as the bigger hurdle. More than six in ten (62 percent) students say they feel like they need more practical information before becoming involved in politics. Less than one third (30 percent) believe that voting in elections is boring.

The need for more information is not evenly shared among students. Female students are more likely than male students to report feeling like they need more information for becoming involved in politics (66 percent vs. 55 percent). Students of color also express this feeling more frequently than white students. At least seventy percent of Hispanic (70 percent), black (72 percent) and Asian students (74 percent) report feeling like they need more information compared to 54 percent of white students. Notably, less than half (48 percent) of white male students report the lack of practical information about politics is an impediment to their involvement. Most white female students do not express this view (32%).

## Most Students Say Sorting Out Fact from Fiction in the News is Difficult

Media consumption habits of college students differ markedly from the broader U.S. public. Fox News is one of the most popular news sources among the general public, but is far less popular among students.

Only four percent of students report that Fox News is their main source of news, trailing other prominent news organizations including CNN and MSNBC, The New York Times and the Washington Post. Notably, one in four (26 percent) students report getting their news from social media. Despite their divergent media use, college students resemble the broader public when it comes to feelings of mistrust of national media. More than six in ten (61 percent) students believe that media bias is such a problem that it makes it difficult to sort out the facts.

Thirty-nine percent of students say that although media bias does exist there are enough news sources to sort out the facts. Patterns of media trust among college students mirror those among the larger public. Republican students express far more distrust of news media than Democrats. Eighty six percent of Republican students say the amount of bias in the news makes it difficult to discern factual information. Fewer than half (45 percent) of Democratic students agree. A majority of Democratic students say despite some bias there are enough news sources to make it possible to identify factual information.

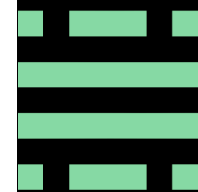
# Conclusion

The pattern of student political preferences and practices that emerges from this report defies easy caricatures found in the national opinion pages. Negative feelings toward Trump run deep on college campuses, but Biden has failed to galvanize student support. A startling number of students express feelings of disaffection toward both major party candidates.

The report also shows the many ways student attitudes are fractured along familiar lines of race and ethnicity, political affiliation and gender. Female college students are more likely to express plans to vote, even as they believe they will face significant headwinds at the polls. While college men are less reliable voters, they are more engaged in following politics than their female counterparts. Democratic students and Republican students differ sharply about the threat of mail-in voting, and their voting plans reflect these perspectives. Black students are far more likely to have participated in a protest, march or rally than other students.

At a time of unprecedented polarization, students appear to recognize the limits of national elections to make progress on the issues they care about. College students place greater faith in local efforts to bring about change even if their tendency to participate in local elections lags behind participation in national elections. Significant concerns about the fairness of the 2020 election are common on campus, and a number of electoral administration issues may undercut confidence students have in the outcome. Although low participation rates are common in many US elections, students draw a direct line between low-voter turnout and fair elections. Despite this, there is little evidence that these fears will dissuade large numbers of college students from participating in the election this year.

Historically, students participate in presidential elections at lower rates than the public overall, but this report paints an optimistic picture about the state of political engagement on college campuses. Political discussions and disagreements are common, so is political expression. And even traditional forms of political engagement—such as contacting elected leaders, donating money or participating in protests—are familiar activities for many students. All of these trends may have important implications for the 2020 election, and how this new generation of American voters engage in politics over their lifetime.



# Methodology

The initial sample was drawn from College Pulse's American College Student Panel™ that includes more than 400,000 verified undergraduate students representing more than 1,000 different two- and four-year colleges and universities in all 50 states. Panel members are recruited by a number of methods to help ensure student diversity in the panel population, including web advertising, permission-based email campaigns, and partnerships with university-affiliated organizations. To ensure the panel reflects the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the American college population, we recruit panelists from a wide variety of different institutions. The panel includes students attending large public universities, small private colleges, online universities, historically black colleges like Howard University and religiously-affiliated schools such as Brigham Young University.

College Pulse uses a two-stage validation process to ensure that all its surveys include only students currently enrolled in four-year colleges or universities. Students are required to provide an .edu email address to join the panel and verify that they are currently enrolled either part-time or full-time in a two- or four-year degree program. All invitations to complete surveys are sent using the student's .edu email address or through notification in the College Pulse App that is available on iOS and Android platforms.

We apply a post-stratification adjustment based on demographic distributions from multiple data sources, including the 2017 Current Population Survey (CPS), the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and the 2017-18 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The post-stratification weight rebalances the sample based on a number of important benchmark attributes, such as race, gender, class year, voter registration status and financial aid status. The sample weighting is accomplished using an iterative proportional fitting (IPF) process that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables. Weights are trimmed to prevent individual interviews from having too much influence on the final results.

The use of these weights in statistical analysis ensures that the demographic characteristics of the sample closely approximate the demographic characteristics of the target populations. Even with these adjustments, surveys may be subject to error or bias due to question wording, context and order effects.

For further information on the methodology, please visit <https://collegepulse.com/methodology>.

**POLITICAL ACTIVISM SURVEY TOPLINE**  
**N=4000 COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Q.1 How closely have you been following news about the \*\*2020 presidential election\*\*?

27%	Very closely
45%	Fairly closely
23%	Not too closely
5%	Not at all closely
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.2 How closely have you been following news about the \*\*coronavirus outbreak known as COVID-19\*\*?

42%	Very closely
46%	Fairly closely
11%	Not too closely
2%	Not at all closely
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.3 How closely have you been following news about the \*\*protests in response to black Americans being mistreated or killed by police\*\*?

42%	Very closely
42%	Fairly closely
13%	Not too closely
3%	Not at all closely
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.4

**Contact:** Anne Schwichtenberg, PhD  
*Director of Research, College Pulse*  
**Email:** Anne@collegepulse.com



**COLLEGE PULSE**



How would you describe the level of certainty that you will vote in November of 2020?

71%	Absolutely certain I will vote
18%	Fairly certain I will vote
5%	Fairly certain I won't vote
2%	Absolutely certain I won't vote
2%	I will be ineligible to vote
0%	
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.5 If the (2020) election for president were being held today, and the candidates were Joe Biden the Democrat and Donald Trump the Republican, for whom would you vote?

66%	Joe Biden
20%	Donald Trump
6%	Would not vote
7%	Someone else
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.6 How are you planning on casting your vote this year?

29%	In-person on Election Day
9%	In-person through early voting
53%	By mail or absentee
<1%	Ineligible to vote
9%	Not sure
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.7

**Contact:** Anne Schwichtenberg, PhD  
*Director of Research, College Pulse*  
**Email:** Anne@collegepulse.com



COLLEGE PULSE

Whether you're registered to vote or not, do you feel that you have enough information to decide who to vote for in the 2020 presidential election?

85%	Yes
15%	No
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.8 Do you think the elections this November in the UNITED STATES will be run and administered...

7%	Very well
38%	Somewhat well
43%	Not too well
12%	Not at all well
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.9 What do you believe is the MOST important issue currently facing the United States today?

Q.10 All in all, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of \*\*Joe Biden\*\*?

7%	Very favorable
42%	Somewhat favorable
29%	Somewhat unfavorable
22%	Very unfavorable
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.11 All in all, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of \*\*Donald Trump\*\*?



7%	Very favorable
12%	Somewhat favorable
13%	Somewhat unfavorable
68%	Very unfavorable
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.12 All in all, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of **\*\*The Republican Party\*\***?

7%	Very favorable
19%	Somewhat favorable
31%	Somewhat unfavorable
43%	Very unfavorable
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.13 All in all, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of **\*\*The Democratic Party\*\***?

8%	Very favorable
43%	Somewhat favorable
29%	Somewhat unfavorable
20%	Very unfavorable
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.14 In the past 12 months have you done any of the following? [Select up to 10 options]

25%	Contacted an elected official
21%	Wore a shirt, hat, or other piece of clothing with a political message



- 43% Contributed to an online discussion advocating for a political position or opinion
- 26% Attended a protest march, rally, or demonstration
- 27% Donated money to a political cause or candidate
- 17% Displayed a sign in your home or dorm supporting a political cause or campaign
- 72% Had a political disagreement with a friend or family member in the last 12 months
- 46% Had a political disagreement with someone you didn't know well in the last 12 months
- 15% None of the above
- 0% Refused

Q.15 Is **voting in national elections** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

- 44% One of the most effective
- 45% Effective, but less so than other ways
- 11% Not that effective
- 0% Refused
- 100% Total

Q.16 Is **voting in local elections** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

- 57% One of the most effective
- 37% Effective, but less so than other ways
- 6% Not that effective
- 0% Refused
- 100% Total

Q.17 Is **volunteering for community service** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?



41%	One of the most effective
48%	Effective, but less so than other ways
10%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.18 Is **\*\*participating in marches or protests\*\*** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

38%	One of the most effective
43%	Effective, but less so than other ways
18%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.19 Is **\*\*running for elected office\*\*** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

50%	One of the most effective
36%	Effective, but less so than other ways
14%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.20 Is **\*\*volunteering for a political campaign\*\*** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

24%	One of the most effective
56%	Effective, but less so than other ways
20%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.21



Is **\*\*donating to a political campaign or cause\*\*** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

19%	One of the most effective
55%	Effective, but less so than other ways
26%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.22 Is **\*\*starting a fundraiser for a campaign or cause\*\*** the most effective way to make progress on the issues you care most about?

28%	One of the most effective
53%	Effective, but less so than other ways
19%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.23 Is **\*\*community organizing the most effective way\*\*** to make progress on the issues you care most about?

50%	One of the most effective
42%	Effective, but less so than other ways
8%	Not that effective
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.24 Growing up did your parents ever do any of the following with you? [Select up to 5 options]

39%	Took you to the polling place on Election Day
9%	Took you to a protest march, rally, or demonstration
63%	Talked with you about a political issue or cause



62%	Discussed news and current events regularly
13%	Took you to community meeting
21%	None of the above
0%	Refused

Q.25 Regardless of whether you plan on voting, how many of your close friends do you think will vote in the 2020 presidential election?

20%	All of them
59%	Most of them
14%	About half of them
6%	A few of them
1%	None of them
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.26 How likely do you think it is that the current presidential election will be conducted in a way that is fair and open?

10%	Very likely
41%	Somewhat likely
38%	Not too likely
11%	Not at all likely
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.27 Would **\*\*evidence of foreign interference\*\*** lead you to have doubts about the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?

48%	Major doubts
43%	Minor doubts
9%	No doubts
0%	Refused



100% Total

Q.28 Would **\*\*problems at polling places such as long lines or broken machines\*\*** lead you to have doubts about the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?

50% Major doubts  
39% Minor doubts  
10% No doubts  
0% Refused  
100% Total

Q.29 Would **\*\*low voter turnout\*\*** lead you to have doubts about the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?

46% Major doubts  
35% Minor doubts  
18% No doubts  
0% Refused  
100% Total

Q.30 Would **\*\*a majority of voters casting ballots by mail\*\*** lead you to have doubts about the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?

25% Major doubts  
32% Minor doubts  
43% No doubts  
0% Refused  
100% Total

Q.31 Would **\*\*the winner of the election losing the popular vote\*\*** lead you to have doubts about the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?





46%	Major doubts
32%	Minor doubts
22%	No doubts
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.32 Would **\*\*taking several weeks to tally all the votes and determine the winner\*\*** lead you to have doubts about the fairness of the 2020 presidential election?

31%	Major doubts
43%	Minor doubts
26%	No doubts
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.33 Overall, do you personally expect voting in the November presidential election to be...

11%	Very easy
39%	Somewhat easy
42%	Somewhat difficult
7%	Very difficult
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.34 Which of these is your main source of news?

4%	FOX News
7%	CNN, MSNBC
6%	ABC/CBS/NBC News
12%	New York Times or Washington Post
30%	Digital or online news



2%	Your local newspaper
4%	Public television or radio
26%	Social media
10%	None of the above
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.35 Thinking for a moment about the way in which the President is elected in this country, which would you prefer...

68%	To amend the Constitution so the candidate who receives the most total votes nationwide wins the election
32%	To keep the current system, in which a candidate who wins the most votes in the Electoral College wins the election
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.36 What is your present religion, if any?

21%	Protestant (Baptist, Methodist, Non-denominational, Lutheran, Presbyterian, □ Pentecostal, Episcopalian, Reformed, Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witness, etc.)
17%	Roman Catholic (Catholic)
1%	Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints/LDS)
1%	Orthodox (Greek, Russian, or some other orthodox church)
3%	Jewish (Judaism)
1%	Muslim (Islam)
1%	Buddhist
1%	Hindu
11%	Atheist (do not believe in God)
14%	Agnostic (not sure if there is a God)
13%	Nothing in particular
11%	Just Christian



4%	Something else
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.37 Would you describe yourself as a "born-again" or evangelical Christian, or not?

34%	Yes
66%	No
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.38 Agree or Disagree: **\*\*Special interest groups have greater influence over elections than voters\*\***

34%	Completely agree
47%	Somewhat agree
16%	Somewhat disagree
3%	Completely disagree
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.39 Agree or Disagree: **\*\*I feel like I need more practical information about politics before I get involved\*\***

21%	Completely agree
41%	Somewhat agree
25%	Somewhat disagree
13%	Completely disagree
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.40 Agree or Disagree: **\*\*The federal government works to improve the lives**



of people like me\*\*

5%	Completely agree
34%	Somewhat agree
40%	Somewhat disagree
21%	Completely disagree
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.41 Agree or Disagree: \*\*All in all, voting in elections is boring\*\*

6%	Completely agree
24%	Somewhat agree
35%	Somewhat disagree
35%	Completely disagree
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.42 Please indicate which of these statements comes closer to how you personally feel...

39%	Although there is some bias in the news media, there are enough sources of news to be able to sort out the facts.
61%	There is so much bias in the news media that it's often difficult to sort out the facts.
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.43 What was the marital status of your parents during most of the time you were growing up? Were they . . .

68%	Married
15%	Divorced



4%	Separated
1%	Widowed
12%	Never married
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.44 Which of the following applies to the education level of your parents?

51%	Both have at least a college degree
24%	Only one has a college degree
25%	Neither has a college degree
0%	Refused
100%	Total

Q.45 Do you personally know anyone in the United States who has tested positive for the coronavirus? [Select up to 4 options]

5%	Yes, myself
8%	Yes, someone in my household
67%	Yes, someone outside my household
27%	No, do not know anyone
0%	Refused

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