THE POWER OF BUILDING A POLITICAL HOME:
BLACK CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND MOVEMENT ORGANIZING

ABOUT THE TEAM

AUTHOR

Katrina L. Gamble, Sojourn Strategies

CONTRIBUTORS

Christian Hosam
Ifeoma Ike
Paige Woods
Kayla Reed

REPORT DESIGN

Colline M. Miller

COVER PHOTO

Michael Scott Milner

REPORT CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary Black liberation movement often referred to as the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) or Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement first arose in early 2013 in reaction to the murder of Trayvon Martin and took on increasing momentum during the Ferguson uprising in 2014 after the police killing of Michael Brown. While the movement galvanized around these pivotal organizing moments regarding state-sanctioned violence and brutality – it has become a broad movement grounded in a vision for Black liberation. This is reflected in the M4BL platform and policy demands that range from reparations to political power and include policy demands such as ending money in politics and election protection.

Going forward, I'll use M4BL or "Black movement organizing" to describe the contemporary Black freedom movement to avoid confusing the broader movement with the BLM Global Network, which is a specific organization. BLM Global Network is an organization among many others that is part of the broader M4BL movement.

We can look at the most recent presidential election and see the impact of the M4BL on our politics. It is impossible to imagine major party candidates authentically debating the merits of reparations without the work of Black movement organizing over the past six years. We see many of these issues that primarily young Black organizers have raised being incorporated into the national electoral narrative in 2016, 2018 and again in the 2020 election cycle.

In 2016, the direct role of movement in elections was less clear and had not been institutionalized in any way by the M4BL. Individual leaders and organizations took varying positions and had different levels of egagement in the 2016 presidential elections. This is not to suggest the movement was invisible; there were critical moments of disruption that pushed candidates to the left that were led by Black organizers, such as protests of Senator Bernie Sanders at Netroots Nation conference in 2015 to protests at a private fundraiser against Hillary Clinton for her record on driving mass incarceration and criminalizing Black communities.[1] Between 2013 and now, we also saw a move to engage in important local elections, such as the powerful #ByeAnita campaign that removed long-time-serving Cook County Attorney Anita Alverez in Illinois and the more recent ousting of Bob McCullough in St. Louis County, Missouri – the prosecutor who oversaw the case on the killing of Michael Brown. However, collective and aligned electoral programs across M4BL did not exist prior to 2016.

---

1 Fandos, Nicholas. July 18, 2015. "Protestors Confront Candidates on Race at Netroots Nation Conference." The New York Times. Last accessed Oct. 30, 2019. Zorthian, Julia. Feb. 26, 2016. "Black Lives Matter Activist Confront Clinton at Fundraiser." Time. Last accessed October 30, 2019.

We saw a dramatic shift when the M4BL created the Electoral Justice Project (EJP) with the leadership of Jessica Byrd, Rukia Lumumba, Kayla Reed and others. In 2017, EJP was created within the M4BL structure to bring an intentional connection between movement organizing and political power building, specifically to build a political home for Black people. We also see the rise of similar movement-oriented organizations, such as Black Voters Matter (BVM) and Woke Vote, which has primarily focused on Black electoral organizing in the South. While organizations such as EJP and BVM have a clear electoral focus, they both also see voting as one tool in a much broader fight. BVM Executive Director and Co-Founder LaTosha Brown said at an event, "Voting is one tool used to transform our country, but voting alone is not going to liberate our people." In other words, voting is a strategy that should not be left on the table, but for real transformation, it is a strategy that must be combined with other forms of engagement.

We also see the development of cross-movement organizing with the creation of The Frontline - a Black-led multiracial coalition that launched in September 2020 to harness the energy from the political uprisings of summer 2020 in both electoral and nonelectoral forms. The Frontline includes partners such as United We Dream Action - the largest immigrant youth-led organization in the country - along with M4BL and the Working Families Party. The coalition organized coordinated actions to defend the democracy and election results in November 2020 and continue to organize around critical issues to its communities.

While the impact of M4BL on macro-level U.S. politics is quite visible as described above, we know very little about the impact on individual-level civic behavior. When we began this project, we were interested in beginning to unpack the impact of movement organizing – particularly M4BL – has on individual-level civic behavior. Are those engaged in movement organizing more or less likely to see elections and voting as a tool for change? What does this concept of political home mean for Black movement organizers, and how does it or does it not inform their perspective of elections and voting?

What we found is that the questions are much more complicated than we originally framed them. To understand the intersection of movement and elections, we have to analyze it within a broader and more historical political context of how Black people have and continue to relate to political institutions in the United States. We were able to unearth this nuance because we started our research with a qualitative approach. We took a step back to first listen to organizers and activists on the ground – to allow them to share in their own voices and thoughts on what they see as the role of movement in political power building and what intersecting the movement with electoral politics actually means for movement participants.

We found that the historic disenfranchisement, suppression and invisibilization of the Black vote is critical to understanding the connection between movement and elections. The long history of voter suppression, as well as political disillusionment among Blacks, informs how individuals see elections and voting, as well as shapes the role of movements. While we often think of social movements as a form of collective action, what we have also learned is that many Black people also think about voting as a collective action that is often done in community. Therefore, we have spent some time exploring how political alienation and racial identity impacts Black political participation. How do Black Americans make sense of their place within the political system, especially during the years of the Trump Administration and increasing displays of white supremacy and violence. The line between what is often described as "formal political participation" and "informal political participation" become more blurred as movements thread together various forms of civic action, including voting to make progress on a shared struggle.

Moreover, in a year with a massive, global pandemic disproportionately harming Black people; an economic crisis that has only widened racial economic disparities; and one of the largest political uprisings in U.S. history over the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and a number other victims, the urgency to better understand the cross-currents of movement and political behavior seems even more relevant.

The underlying takeaway from our research is that the Black leaders we spoke to both within focus groups and one on one are very skeptical of existing political institutions alone as vehicles for change for the Black community. They cite experiences of their voices and votes being taken for granted and their communities only being tapped for outreach in a transactional way around election time and then ignored until the next election. Despite this disillusionment, it was also clear that they see elections and voting as a power center that can not be ceded – that to create change and build toward liberation, Black movement organizers and leaders have to fight on the electoral field. However, what distinguishes the electoral engagement that movement organizers are building and nurturing from traditional electoral work is the ways in which movement leaders engage in the work and the importance of their grounding principles and the intention to build an inclusive collective political home for Black people.

It is this sense of connection and community that helps to sustain electoral and political participation of movement leaders. There is a clear understanding that while elections are important, they cannot be the only way folks collectively organize to impact change. In other words, knowing that elections are just one tool and strategy being used to impact change in a much more holistical power-building strategy enables people to weather losses and challenges, as well as tap into other points of collective power when elections and elected officials fail.

In our interviews, several leaders – when asked whether they thought movement organizing was a way to bring individuals into voting and formal political participation – said that we were asking the question the wrong way. For many Black Americans, voting is an easy entry into civic participation,[2] but connecting that vote to a movement political home helps sustain participation that may otherwise be depressed from disillusionment from nonresponsive government, elected officials and political institution.

In a national survey of young Black people, we find similar trends. Despite a high level of political alienation, young Black people remain civically engaged. Our research suggests that is due, in part, to a sense of social responsibility to the Black community and hopefulness in the future.

As one Chicago organizer said:

"I think it's helpful to use voting and elections as a vehicle to bring people into movement, and we can also use movement to bring people [to] the elections and voting space as well. But if we're really doing our jobs, we're moving towards social transformation – that requires building people's political consciousness to understand that, yes, certain systems are rigged against us and ultimately we want to see a transformation of those systems. So, we have to figure out how to bring people into taking action in relation to those systems without tempering the critique of those systems. It really requires us to show people unique models of engaging with elections that don't look like you vote and that's the only way you get a say in the system. Because people haven't seen it play out that way, people have experienced voter suppression, people have experienced corruption in elections and people have experienced being told to "shut up and vote" and that is really real – and there is a valuation of what are acceptable forms of resistance and what are not."

There is this balance of organizing people to move to action in a system that they know is flawed and needs to be transformed while not becoming complacent in accepting the system as it is. To fight to transform a system in which you are currently working in, the work has to be grounded in particular values, political education and a sense of political autonomy.

2 Ray, Rashawn and Mark Whitlock. Sept. 12, 2019. "Setting the Record Straight on Black Voter Turnout." Brookings. Last accessed October 31, 2019.

METHODOLOGY

For this project, we interviewed individuals who are leaders in M4BL organizations and/or EJP Fellows. We interviewed eight individuals in seven different cities – Baltimore, Phoenix, Miami, St. Louis, Chicago and Atlanta. The interviews were open ended and semi structured. We also conducted focus groups in four cities – Oakland, California; Detroit, Michigan; Miami, Florida; and Birmingham, Alabama.

We chose these geographies to capture regional diversity, and we also wanted to speak to individuals in cities with different levels of movement infrastructure. For example, Oakland is a city with a long history of political movement engagement and is the home of many movement and organizing groups. Detroit is a city that is often viewed through a very transactional electoral lens in national politics because Michigan is frequently deemed a swing state.

The focus group participants were a mix of individuals who are either members or staff of movement and/or community organizing groups, as well as individuals who have engaged in some level of movement activity but did not necessarily have an organizational political home or affiliation. Focus group participants were activists, organizers and advocates who reported being engaged in social movements dedicated to the conditions of Black lives. With the exception of one participant (a Native American from Detroit), all participants self-identified as Black. Organizations to which participants belong include Mothering Justice, Michigan United, Detroit Parent Network, United Auto Workers, Woke Vote, Dream Defenders, New Florida Majority, Black Lives Matter Alliance Broward, Urban Peace Movement and BYP 100.

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA   DETRIOT, MICHIGAN
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA   CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
PHOENIX, ARIZONA   ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
MIAMI, FLORIDA
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND   ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Building off of the qualitative research, we also fielded a national survey of young Black people aged 18 to 35 with 1,065 respondents. The sample roughly approximated the national level of voter registration, with just over 60% of respondents indicating that they had registered to vote for the 2020 election, and about 43.8% said they definitely planned to vote in the November 2020 elections.[3]
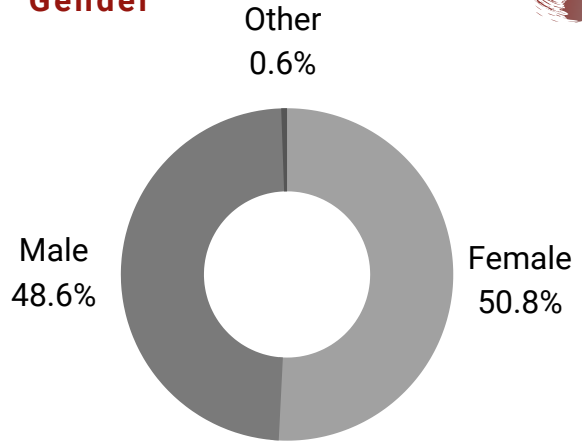

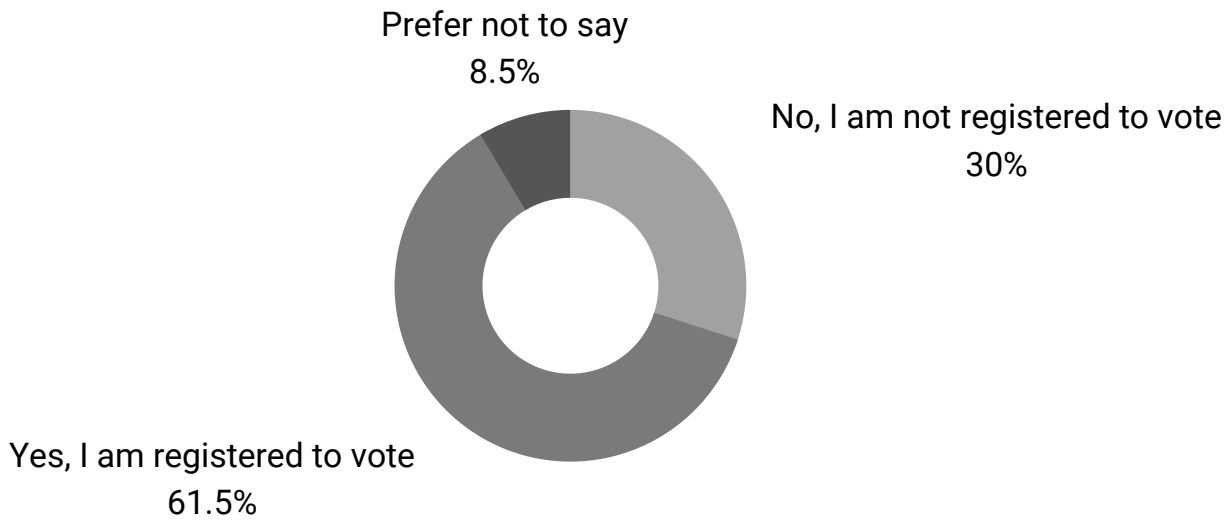3 In 2016, approximately 42-44 percent of young people voted.

**Figure 1:
Age**

25-35
46.3%

18-24
53.7%

**Figure 2:
Gender**

Other
0.6%

Male
48.6%

Female
50.8%

**Figure 3:
Voter Registration**

Prefer not to say
8.5%

No, I am not registered to vote
30%

Yes, I am registered to vote
61.5%

**Figure 4:
2020 Vote Likelihood**

Definitely will not vote
12.3%

Probably will not vote
8.8%

Definitely will vote
43.8%

Uncertain about whether I will vote or not
16.9%

Probably will vote
18.1%
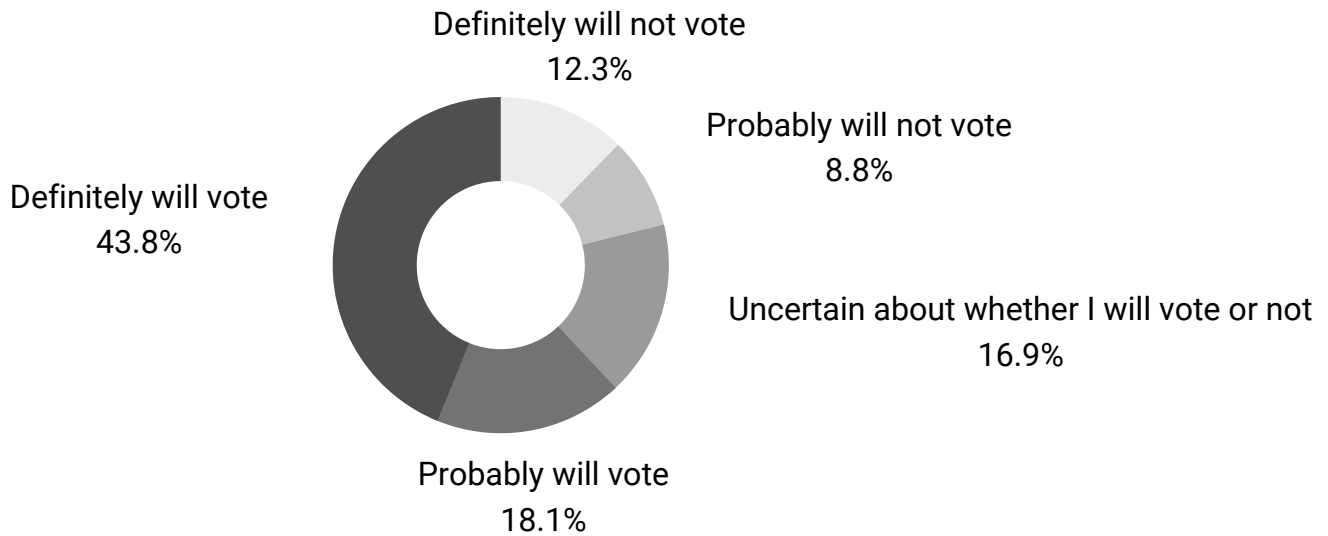
DEFINING MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL POWER

Social movements, broadly defined, are individuals engaged in some form of collective action to create social and/or political change. For research participants, we found they described three core qualities of movements: radical disruption, shared struggle and collective action.

Radical Disruption:
They described movement as something that challenges the status quo – it is a disruption to the current political system and institutions. This point is particularly important when thinking about the relationship between movement and voting. Voting is an action taken within the system in which movement organizers are working to disrupt or transform. For example, one organizer when asked to describe what movements mean to him said:

> "*Movements, right ... are when hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people are actively demonstrating, actively organizing in a visible and very public way around political and social issues that impact them but in a way that shifts or attempts to shift the political dynamics of the status quo.*"

For the organizer quoted above, movements are about scale, they are about action, but ultimately they are about shifting the status quo. *If disruption is an underlying purpose of movements, it must require some push and pull for movement actors to organize and engage in more traditional forms of civic action, such as voting.*

Shared struggle:
When describing social movements, individuals used terms such as a "culture of solidarity," "shared struggle" and "community." Movement actors have a shared goal. Interestingly, at least two participants described movement as connected across time periods – meaning the contemporary Black freedom movement is a continuation of past Black civil rights and liberation movements. They see themselves as part of movements focused on liberation, freedom, environmental justice, pushing back against state-sanctioned violence and other issues. Across the focus groups and individual interviews, participants described movements as a community in which individuals are working toward a shared transformative goal.

> *"I think of movement as sort of this group of people – small or large – working on some sort of liberation work. I know we say the movement – it is on the rise, but I look at it from a historical context. I think of what is happening now as an extension of freedom work from decades past. People coming together trying to get closer to freedom."*
> – St. Louis Organizer

The Black movement participants we interviewed see movement's purpose as a push on broad transformative change – liberation, freedom, abolition. If you're focused on major transformative outcomes, it would make sense that traditional transactional approaches to voting would be met with skepticism. However, what we have learned is that many of these organizers see elections and voting as a way to set the field, if done in a way that centers community and can be used to uplift and set a radical agenda. It is less about any particular candidate and more about using it as a power-building tool to move transformative platforms. As Charlene Carutthers, former national director of BYP 100, writes, "Elections allow marginalized groups of people to shape the terrain of political struggle by electing candidates who champion our issues and ousting those who act against our collective interests."4 ***This does not mean elections are seen as unimportant, but it does mean they necessarily must be situated in a much more comprehensive political strategy that does not limit political participation to simply the act of voting.***

4 Carruthers, Charlene. Nov. 5, 2018. "Before the Midterms, Five Questions for the Political Left." Truth Out. Last accessed April 22, 2021.

Collective Action:

Central to movements is this idea of collective action – individuals taking actions to push for change within existing systems and institutions. That does not mean all movement actors are engaged in the same forms of activity, but those individual actions feed into a collective whole. As one focus group respondent from Oakland stated, "Ideally everybody has a role. I don't think it's a movement when everybody gotta shut the highway down … [we should be] like radical chess players." Or as a leader in St. Louis described her work: "I think my role is a just getting-things-done kind of role. It's easier to see work that needs to happen and make it happen." Collective action is also about the scale and momentum behind movements.

> *"It has something to do with the amount of energy around a particular struggle – the amount of people who are involved – and it is something that describes a level of engagement that we could never reach through one-on-one conversations or just through door knocking. It is something that has spiraled beyond where actions have become replicable, and there is an amount of energy and momentum that goes beyond what we're able to cultivate in less-energized moments around the struggles that we work on."*
> *– Chicago organizer*

We saw the importance of building community come up in other parts of the interviews and focus groups. People see themselves as a part of something larger than themselves, and they see building a broad base and acting collectively as fundamental to shifting power structures and disrupting the status quo. **Voting is an individual act, but when done as part of movement organizing, it is done in the service of a collective strategy.**

Another central concept that runs through this research project is political power. Often when analyzing elections and voting, obtaining political power is seen as the ultimate desired outcome. In the movement-organizing context, political power is about much more than electoral outcomes. We asked organizers and community members what political power means to them. We also asked what it would look like for Blacks to have political power. What we found is that participants view political power in two ways: both at the macro and micro level. They described political power as the ability to impact society, influence and change systems, and effect decisions that affect Black communities, families and lives.

They also described political power as the ability to have basic human rights met. For example, one participant in the Miami focus groups said, "On the ground level, real level, access to food. You can't have political power if you're hungry, if your kids can't go to school, if I'm an immigrant and I'm looking over my back." Or as an organizer in Phoenix said, "It looks like our folks actually thriving and being well. It looks like the Black infant mortality rates significantly decreasing if not being eliminated … it means our folks have options for work that are honored; it looks like access to health care. It looks like Black joy."

On the other end, they defined political power as the ability to shape and make decisions that impact how society is structured, the ability to change political institutions and having autonomy over our communities. No one described political power as simply electing more people into office. Some participants mentioned elected officials but did so as having people in office "who are accountable to us and prioritize us and our needs."

If one aim of elections and voting is to build political power that fundamentally means having enough power to change the immediate living conditions of Black people, it also means having enough influence to shift and change systems that have a long history of inflicting harm on Black people. That ultimately means that voting is not about electing any one individual but, again, about moving the needle on this broader liberation fight. One organizer described it this way:

> "My ancestors didn't die for me to vote; my folks died for my liberation and the continued liberation of our people, and the vote is part of it but also much more. When we're talking about people who don't have their right [to vote], do they get to engage civically? No, they don't. But when we're talking about electoral justice, yes, they do. And actually [their] voice is centered, and it is about what does it look like to move and shape and shift political conversations."

In this context, even those who are not able to vote or choose not to vote still have a role and a voice in building and moving political power. Another concrete example from Chicago worth elevating:

> "In Chicago, we won six of the city council seats – socialist, leftist, progressives – but we lost the mayoral race. People were beat up about that – but the fact that we won these seats is an indication of our power. Being able to see the gains for what they are. Us being able to use our might in a way that gets us the things that we want feeds into our power building. If we get a moratorium on rent hikes, that feeds into our ability to stay in one place and continue to build power."

With these two concepts defined, the next section shifts the discussion to how individual participants view voting and what their individual level of civic engagement looks like.

ATTITUDES ON VOTING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

We found both in the focus groups and the survey that there is a high level of political alienation among young Black people - 57% of respondents believe that the political system is rigged against people like them. There is a high level of cynicism toward political institutions, especially in terms of delivering on substantive improvements that impact the daily lived experiences of most Black people. The focus groups revealed that there is an underlying belief that the material conditions, especially for the most marginalized Black people, have not improved. Furthermore, more than 79% of survey respondents reported experiencing discrimination due to their race.
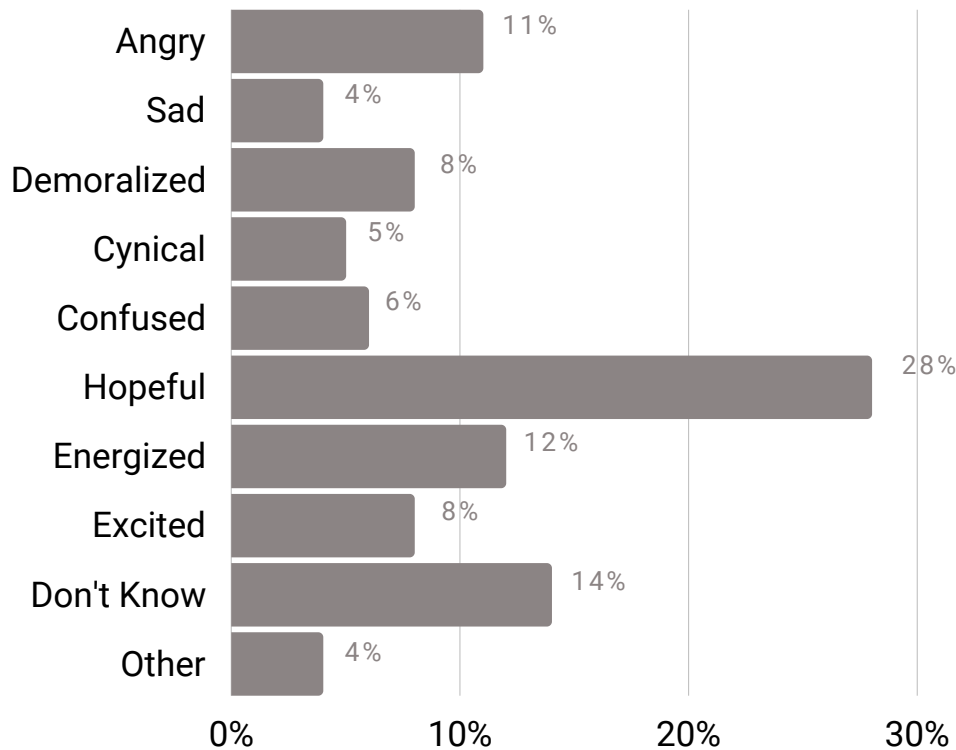
Figure 5:
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
"The political system is rigged against people like me."
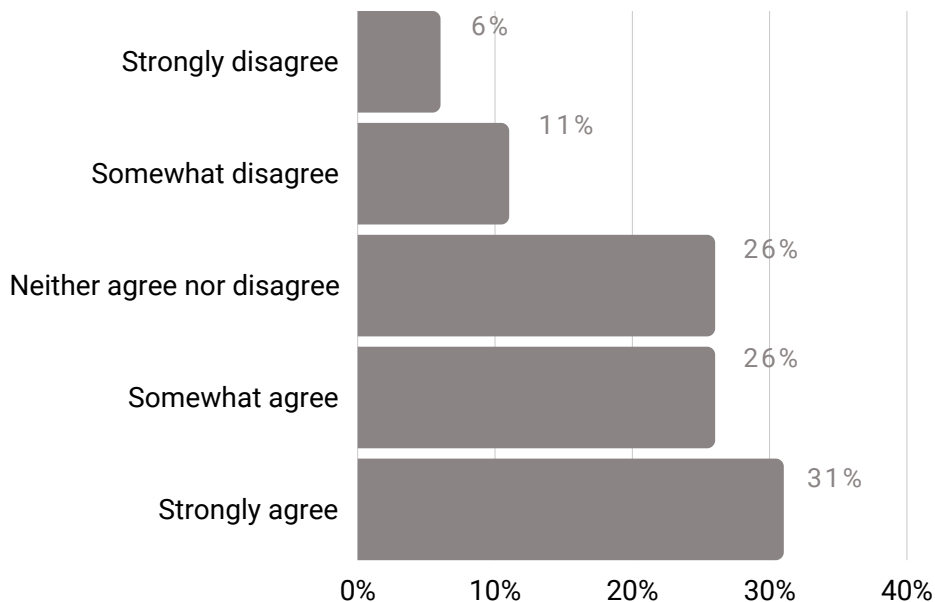
Despite a high level of political alienation and personal experience with racial discrimination, more than 50% of survey respondents reported a sense of optimism about their personal future, and 50% believe that it is likely that Black people will have equal rights in the United States in the future. Even more striking, when asked what emotion most closely describes how they feel about the 2020 presidential election, hopeful received the highest response. Twenty-eight percent of respondents said they felt hopeful about the 2020 elections. It is important to remember that this survey was conducted in September 2020 right after a summer of massive political uprisings and in the midst of a global pandemic - yet even in that moment some young Black people felt hopeful about the election.

These findings align with recent research by Davin Phoenix where we find that anger does not serve to prime Black people to higher levels of what we might call conventional political participation such as voting.[5] Furthermore, Black people are more likely to participate when they see policy opportunities or expressions of hope and pride. We see similar findings. Of those who said they would definitely vote, 43.5% reported feeling hopeful about the election. And of those who said they definitely would not vote, the highest response was "Don't know," indicating either ambivalence or lack of knowledge.

Figure 6:

Regarding the 2020 presidential election in November, what emotion most closely describes how you feel most of the time?

Emotion	Percentage
Angry	11%
Sad	4%
Demoralized	8%
Cynical	5%
Confused	6%
Hopeful	28%
Energized	12%
Excited	8%
Don't Know	14%
Other	4%

5 Phoenix, Davin. 2020. "The Anger Gap: How Race Shapes Emotion in Politics." Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Table 1

| | Regarding the 2020 presidential election in November, what emotion most closely describes how you feel most of the time? | | | | | | | | | |
	ANGRY	SAD	DEMORALIZED	CYNICAL	CONFUSED	HOPEFUL	ENERGIZED	EXCITED	DON'T KNOW	OTHER
DEFINITELY WILL NOT VOTE	10.7%	12.5%	7.1%	4.5%	7.1%	13.4%	5.4%	2.7%	32.1%	4.5%
PROBABLY WILL NOT VOTE	7.1%	2.7%	17.0%	9.8%	8.9%	8.0%	20.5%	4.5%	16.1%	5.4%
UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER I WILL VOTE OR NOT	14.7%	3.5%	8.2%	5.9%	4.7%	16.5%	11.8%	10.6%	20.0%	4.1%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	12.8%	2.6%	13.5%	6.4%	11.5%	17.3%	12.8%	9.0%	10.9%	3.2%
DEFINITELY WILL VOTE	11.0%	3.8%	4.6%	3.8%	3.6%	43.5%	10.4%	8.4%	8.2%	2.8%

How likely are you to vote in the November 2020 presidential election?

Interestingly, Black people seem to hold both deep distrust in American politics as well as an abiding belief in its ultimate adherence to ideals of civic responsibility and equality - or at least the potential of the U.S. living up to those ideals. Even as young people face high levels of political cynicism, that alienation still correlates with higher levels of participation, not less. Of those who said they definitely would vote in the 2020 elections, 74.6% believed the system was rigged against people like them. Comparatively, of those who said they definitely would not vote, just over 40% thought the system was rigged.

Table 2

	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "The political system is rigged against people like me."				
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
DEFINITELY WILL NOT VOTE	22.5%	9.0%	27.9%	18.0%	22.5%
PROBABLY WILL NOT VOTE	5.3%	29.2%	34.5%	8.8%	22.1%
UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER I WILL VOTE OR NOT	2.4%	18.2%	42.4%	22.9%	14.1%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	3.9%	15.5%	29.0%	32.9%	18.7%
DEFINITELY WILL VOTE	4.8%	4.0%	16.6%	29.9%	44.7%

(Row group heading, left axis: How likely are you to vote in the November 2020 presidential election?)

This also tracked with other forms of civic participation. We created two participation scales: (1) a scale that measured whether respondents engaged in more formal political participation in the last 12 months, such as contacted a public official or donated to a candidate; and (2) a scale that measured what we call more community engagement such as volunteered with a community organization or donated to a community organization.[6]

For those who strongly agreed the system was rigged, the mean formal participation score was 2.30, and community participation score was 2.64, compared to 1.75 and 1.62, respectively, for those who strongly disagree that the system is rigged. That is a difference of 0.55 and 1.02. **The takeaway is that those with a high level of political alienation are more likely to engage in formal and informal civic action.**

---

6 See Figures A3 and A4 in appendix for more details on these scales.

Also, when asking survey respondents about the value of voting, the sentiments that resonated most were the ones that talked about voting in terms of improving things for the Black community, and their families or as a tool that can be used to create change but alone is not transformative. Table 3 shows that young Black people see voting as a way to create change, but they don't necessarily associate it alone as a way to build power or as a transformative tool.

Table 3

Next are a few statements on how some people think about voting. Please share whether you agree or disagree with each statement.	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL
"VOTING IS A WAY I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE ON ISSUES THAT MATTER TO ME AND MY FAMILY."	24%	35%	59%
"VOTING IS A WAY TO BUILD POLITICAL POWER FOR MY COMMUNITY."	27%	28%	55%
"VOTING IS A CIVIC DUTY, AND WE SHOULD ALWAYS VOTE NO MATTER WHAT."	20%	31%	51%
"VOTING DOESN'T CHANGE THINGS."	19%	18%	37%
"VOTING IS AN IMPORTANT TOOL THAT CAN BE USED TO CREATE CHANGE, BUT VOTING ALONE WILL NOT TRANSFORM THINGS."	27%	35%	62%
"VOTING IS A WAY I CAN IMPROVE THINGS FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY."	26%	32%	58%

When we conducted focus groups and qualitative interviews, we found that movement organizers often talked about voting as important but not necessarily an effective strategy on its own. For example:

"Political education not only helps us get the win like getting McCullogh unseated or getting so, so close to electing the first Black mayor in St. Louis. Or all the criminal justice reform work post-Ferguson that has gotten done. The strategy is always about how can we engage Black people in this movement work and demystify politics. That is what gets a lot of the work done. Engaging the people that have been overlooked for so long. The work we're doing in St. Louis/North St. Louis County. Going to the communities that never get canvassed or engaged or asked what's important to them. Our main focal point is to engage Black people – it is mostly younger Black folks. We deliver the Woke Voter Guide, brunches, talking to them about what's important to them – all of those things work in concert to make sure people feel enough self-worth to participate."
- St. Louis Organizer

Voting is an important tactic to create change if it is integrated with other movement and organizing work. Our survey data suggests that the young Black respondents think about voting in similar ways.

The other really interesting finding is that there was significant correlation between voting and linked fate. Linked fate is a term that political scientist Michael Dawson coined, describing the sense that what happens to other Black people affects their individual lives.[7] We found that 55% of respondents have high levels of linked fate. And of the voters who said they would definitely vote in the 2020 election, 53.3% said that what happens to other Black people affects their own lives a great deal. We see a similar correlation between voting and those who think Blacks should work more collectively - 54.8% of those who said they would definitely vote thought that Black people working collectively could create political change.

---

7 Dawson, Michael. 1994. "Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics." Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Figure 7:
How much, if at all, do you think what happens to Black people in this country overall affects what happens in your own life?

Not at all	10%
A little	9%
A moderate amount	26%
A lot	19%
A great deal	36%
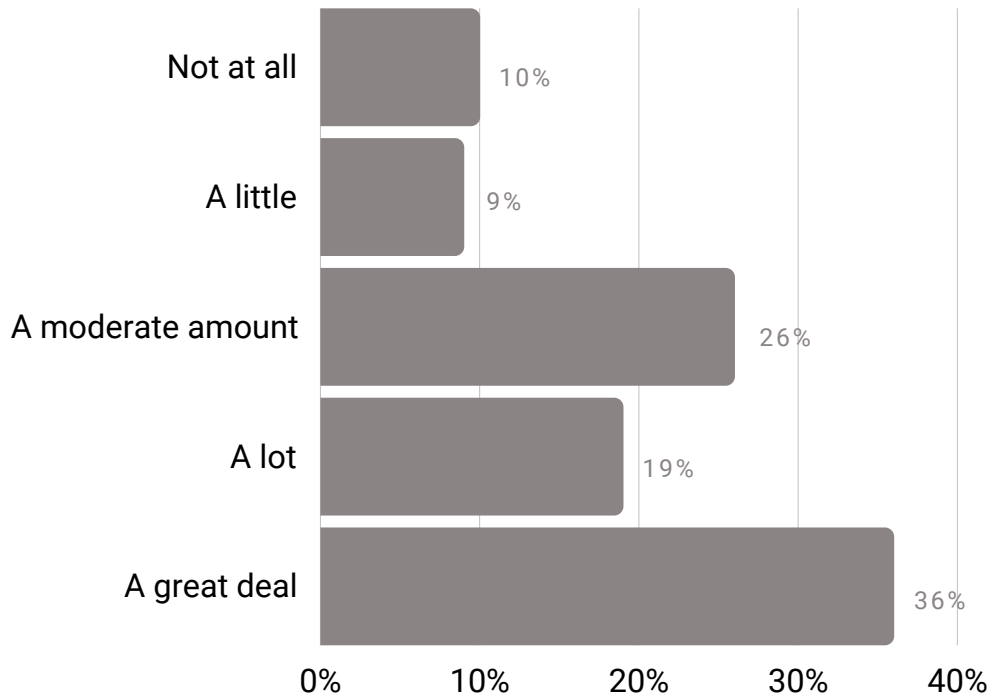
Put together, in the context of the massive voter turnout seen in the 2020 election, our results suggest that so much of the participation that we saw take place has to do with both a deep awareness of the systemic injustices that Black people and communities of color face and a sense of civic efficacy and belief that the work of voting has its place within the context of Black life. And we see this when we invert the results as well: The emotion that had the largest negative impact on voter turnout was not positive or negative but "I don't know," suggesting that a lot of our results are likely driven by the awareness of the context that people live in, without a strong, unidimensional sense of how that makes people feel.
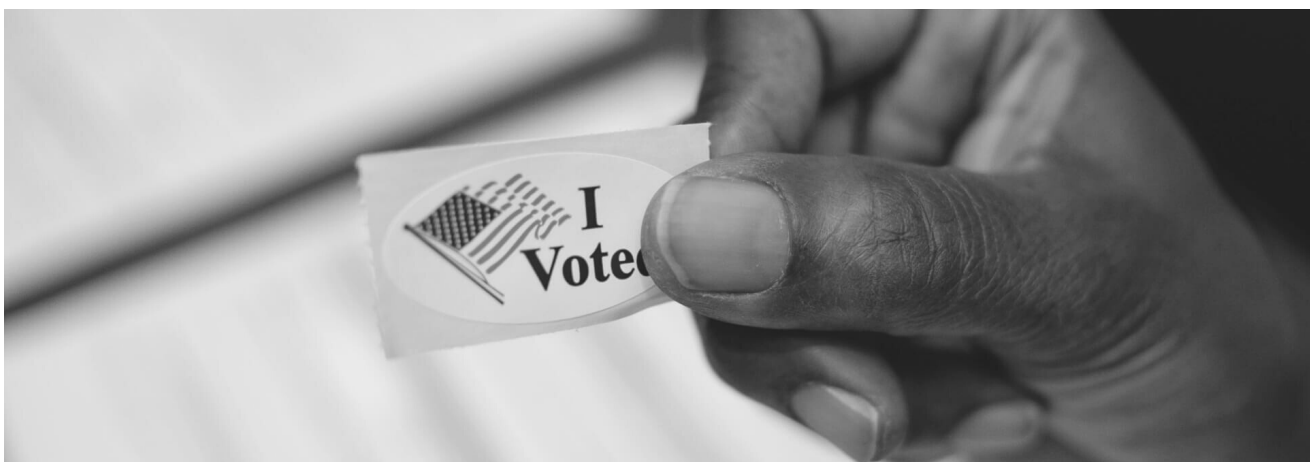
Table 4:

	How likely, if at all, do you think what happens to Black people in this country overall affects what happens in your own life?				
	NOT AT ALL	A LITTLE	A MODERATE AMOUNT	A LOT	A GREAT DEAL
DEFINITELY WILL NOT VOTE	38.9%	11.5%	17.7%	16.8%	15.0%
PROBABLY WILL NOT VOTE	9.6%	15.8%	43.0%	15.8%	15.8%
UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER I WILL VOTE OR NOT	10.5%	7.6%	46.5%	11.0%	24.4%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	9.0%	16.8%	26.5%	25.2%	22.6%
DEFINITELY WILL VOTE	3.2%	5.4%	17.0%	21.2%	53.3%

How likely are you to vote in the November 2020 presidential election?

Table 5:

|	How important is being Black to how you think about yourself?				
How likely are you to vote in the November 2020 presidential election?	NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	ONLY A LITTLE IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT
DEFINITELY WILL NOT VOTE	23.2%	15.2%	19.6%	16.1%	25.9%
PROBABLY WILL NOT VOTE	2.7%	19.5%	23.9%	24.8%	29.2%
UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER I WILL VOTE OR NOT	19.3%	8.2%	36.3%	15.2%	21.1%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	3.9%	9.7%	33.8%	27.9%	24.7%
DEFINITELY WILL VOTE	2.4%	3.8%	10.8%	19.5%	63.5%

Table 6:

	Some people say that Blacks would have more political impact if they worked in coalition together. Do you think that Black people working collectively can create political change?				
How likely are you to vote in the November 2020 presidential election?	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
DEFINITELY WILL NOT VOTE	17.9%	13.4%	32.1%	15.2%	21.4%
PROBABLY WILL NOT VOTE	6.2%	9.7%	29.2%	29.2%	25.7%
UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER I WILL VOTE OR NOT	2.9%	9.4%	44.7%	21.8%	21.2%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	5.8%	9.1%	16.9%	36.4%	31.8%
DEFINITELY WILL VOTE	0.8%	4.6%	14.3%	25.5%	54.8%

The thread that is forming from this research is that a strong racial identity and civic action that is seen as benefiting one's community or the broader Black community are significant motivators for young Black people. The recent electoral organizing we've seen recently by organizations such as Black Voters Matter and Electoral Justice project are highly effective at engaging young Black people in part, our research suggests, because they treat voting as a community act and center the Black racial identity. The challenge is how do we sustain this sense of civic responsibility and hopefulness in the face of increasing and continued attacks on Black people and high levels of cynicism.

THE POWER OF MOVEMENT AND POLITICS

In 2020, a year marked not only by a global pandemic but by historic social protests in response to continued police violence, we see this reflected in our survey simply in terms of sheer numbers of people going out to protest. According to The New York Times, the protests taking place around the country (and the world) in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder had anywhere between 15 million to 26 million participants.[8] Asking our respondents whether they participated in a protest, demonstration, or rally in the last 12 months, a full 41% of respondents stated that they had. In the context of costly participation that most general polls find very low levels of participation, we believe this number is reflective of the broader spike and energy around protests taking place in honor of and solidarity with Black life. With this dramatic level of protest participation, how do we understand what drove people to the streets?

Figure 8:
Thinking about the last 12 months, have you taken any of the following actions: attended a protest, march or rally?

Yes 41%

No 59%
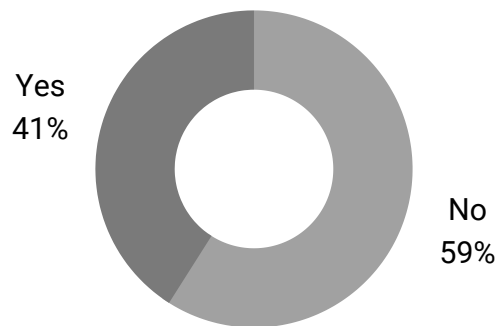
The first thing to note is that protesting and voting are far more tied together than seen as separate mechanisms for change. Within the survey, we asked participants a battery of questions about their thoughts on the effectiveness of a number of political activities including but not limited to voting, campaign contributions, neighborhood work and protests. Interestingly, we found that the more forms of participation individuals do, the more likely they are to vote, demonstrating that, at least for our sample, participation is not something that is siloed but mutually empowering and predictive.

In that vein, the first thing to note about what drives protest is that, in our sample, it is predicted most through experience. While there was no silver bullet that predicted protest and it is hard to say the particular impact that this year had on individuals' propensity to participate in demonstrations, we can show that our measure of experiences with racism was positively correlated with likelihood of protesting, indicating that as people had more regular exposure to racism, their likelihood of stating that they participated in a protest in the last 12 months consistently went up.

---

8 Buchanan, Larry, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel. 2020. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." The New York Times. Last accessed December 9, 2020.

Relatedly, we also found a positive yet weaker relationship between protesting and our linked fate measure (see Figure A4). Put another way, our sample shows that seeing racism in one's day-to-day life was the most predictive of protesting out of our measures that look at efficacy and experience within the American political system for Black folks, suggesting that one's personal proximity to the pain and damage of police brutality seemed to have led them to the decision to protest for Black lives, with social responsibility to other Black people being an important but less salient factor. We found that political alienation or a belief in the system being rigged had a weak negative relationship to protest.

Table 7:

Thinking about the last 12 months, have you taken any of the following actions: attended a protest, march or rally?	Thinking about your own experience, have you ever personally experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of your race or ethnicity?		
	NO	YES, FROM TIME TO TIME	YES, REGULARLY
NO	31.1%	48.6%	20.3%
YES	6.2%	38.0%	55.8%

Table 8:

Thinking about the last 12 months, have you taken any of the following actions: attended a protest, march or rally?	How much, if at all, do you think what happens to Black people in this country overall affects what happens in your own life?				
	NOT AT ALL	A LITTLE	A MODERATE AMOUNT	A LOT	A GREAT DEAL
NO	12.8%	9.9%	27.4%	22.0%	27.9%
YES	5.1%	8.3%	24.4%	14.7%	47.5%

Table 9:

Thinking about the last 12 months, have you taken any of the following actions: attended a protest, march or rally?	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "The political system is rigged against people like me."				
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
NO	7.9%	8.9%	27.7%	28.0%	24.7%
YES	3.7%	14.7%	22.5%	22.5%	36.6%

Curiously, however, the variation in terms of whether one does vote is wide, owing largely to the fact that when people respond no to the question of whether they have experienced racism, our data shows that there is roughly equal suggestion that people will or will not vote. ***This means that experiencing racism is something that drives people to both protesting and voting, but not experiencing racism is strongly related to not protesting. Or, in other words, experiencing racism leads to all forms of action, while not experiencing it might still lead to awareness of racism but only compel action that might be seen as more aligned with formal institutions, such as voting.***

Put together, the distinction between voting and protest in our sample says less about a ranking between the two in terms of importance and far more about how Black people make sense of how to participate in a system when confronted with the realities of racism and oppression and how they think about that racism as focused on the self or on their communities and beyond. Personal experience with racism combined with strong racial identity seem to lead to increased protest, whereas those who have not experienced racism are less likely to engage in protest. Given that protest is seen outside formal institutions and upending the status quo, it may require a greater level of personal connection to marginalization. However, another important factor to lift up is that those who participated in protest are more likely to strongly agree that Black people should work collectively to create change - 51.3% of those who participated in protest strongly agreed that Black people should work collectively to create change compared to just 31% of those who did not participate in protest. While personal experience may be an underlying motivator for young Black people to participate in protest, it also does still seem to drive interest in collective action.

Table 10:

Thinking about the last 12 months, have you taken any of the following actions: attended a protest, march or rally?	Some people say that Blacks would have more political impact if they worked in coalition together. Do you think that Black people working collectively can create political change?				
		STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
	NO	5.2%	7.5%	28.2%	28.2%	31.0%
	YES	3.2%	7.6%	15.7%	22.2%	51.3%

BUILDING A BLACK POLITICAL HOME

Building a Black political home for all Black people is one of EJP's central missions. EJP leaders describe it as a way to disrupt the current system that puts up structural barriers that prevent Black people from engaging in political processes and prevents Black people from building the power needed to transform the system. It is about building a home that pushes back on barriers to voting, voter suppression, and electing leaders who value the importance of Black life. The focus is to build electoral justice by building Black civic power led by Black movement organizations and in Black communities across the country. It acknowledges that the current system is problematic and that the way forward is to organize Black people in a way that centers community and is focused on Black liberation.

We wanted to understand what participants thought about this idea of a Black political home and what it looked like and whether it was needed to build Black political power. Both movement leaders whom we interviewed and focus group respondents expressed an urgent need for a Black political home. Folks described a need for a Black political home for several reasons. First, several respondents described the need for a space where Black people can show up as their whole selves. "A place where people feel affirmed and where people's ability to sort of just exist isn't questioned," said one organizer. "It is a home where I get to be whole … a parent, queer, straight, in student debt, working class, whatever it is, I get to bring my whole self."

Given the marginalization that Blacks feel within the existing political system, it is not surprising to see such value being put on building a Black political home. The values of the political home align with how people think about movements. It is a place for disruption; it is a space to build community; it is a space dream and vision beyond the status quo; and it is a space to act collectively to build political power and shift existing structures.

We wanted to explore how this concept of a Black political home resonated with young Black people who were less directly connected to movement, so we included questions in our national survey. We explicitly used the M4BL EJP definition of a Black political home. A Black political home is defined as "an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power."

Nearly 60% of respondents agreed that Black people need their own political home, and only 10% of the sample disagreed with the idea of a Black political home, suggesting that there is a legitimate appetite and need for a type of space that allows for the specific needs of Black political action, both electoral and nonelectoral.

Figure 9:

Some people say that Black people need their own political home. A Black political home would be an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree that Black people need their own political home or organization?
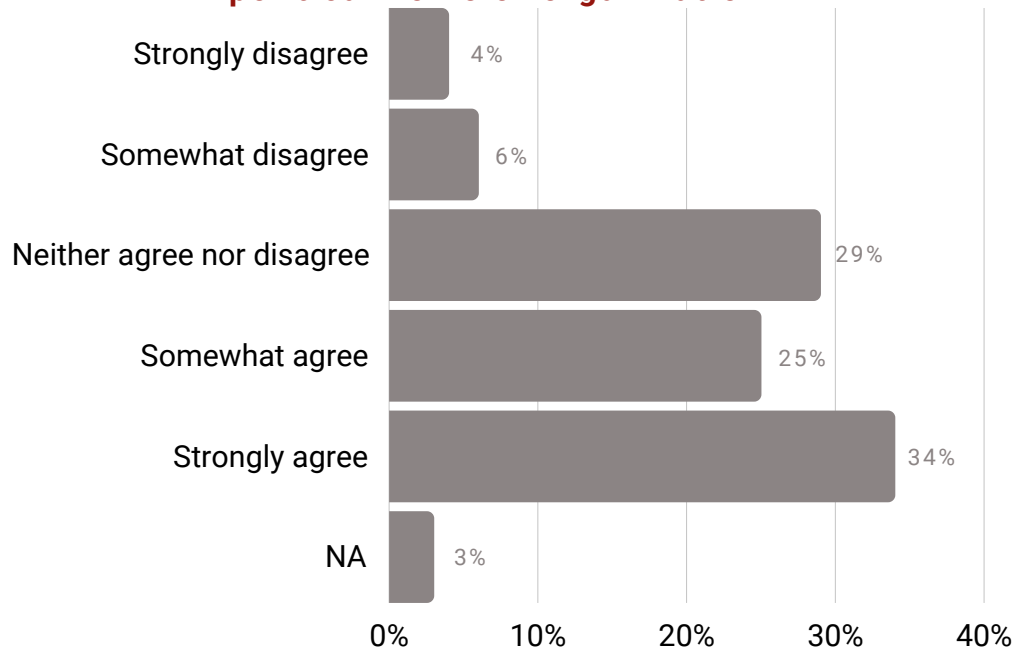
Believing in the need for a Black political home is a strong and positive predictor of both voting and participation in protest. The desire for a Black political home suggests a sense of civic duty and participation in ways both conventional and movement oriented.

Table 11:

How likely are you to vote in the November 2020 presidential election?	Some people say that Black people need their own political home. A Black political home would be an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree that Black people need their own political home or organization?				
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	**SOMEWHAT DISAGREE**	**NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE**	**SOMEWHAT AGREE**	**STRONGLY AGREE**
DEFINITELY WILL NOT VOTE	6.0%	11.0%	37.0%	26.0%	20.0%
PROBABLY WILL NOT VOTE	9.9%	3.6%	33.3%	25.2%	27.9%
UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHETHER I WILL VOTE OR NOT	0.0%	8.3%	58.0%	14.8%	18.9%
PROBABLY WILL VOTE	2.7%	3.4%	37.2%	35.8%	20.9%
DEFINITELY WILL VOTE	3.9%	4.9%	16.8%	25.6%	48.9%

Table 12:

Thinking about the last 12 months, have you taken any of the following actions: attended a protest, march or rally?	Some people say that Black people need their own political home. A Black political home would be an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree that Black people need their own political home or organization?				
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
NO	5.2%	4.2%	37.1%	25.5%	27.9%
YES	2.1%	7.7%	20.8%	25.1%	44.3%

What this also tells us is that the desire for a Black political home is one that is intimately tied to one's perception of the Black experience. And we do see evidence for this in relationships between our political home measure and our items measuring respondents' racial identity. Respondents with a high sense of linked fate and racial identity were more likely to agree that Black people needed a political home. For example, of those who strongly agreed that Black people need a political home, 66% saw being Black as extremely important to who they were. Similarly, more than 50% of respondents who strongly agreed that the Black people need a political home also strongly agree that the system is rigged against people like them, meaning that a high level of political alienation also aligns with a belief that Black people need a political home.

Table 13:

Some people say that Black people need their own political home. A Black political home would be an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree that Black people need their own political home or organization?		How important is being Black to how you think about yourself?				
		NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT	ONLY A LITTLE IMPORTANT	MODERATELY IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	15.4%	10.3%	15.4%	15.4%	43.6%
	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	15.5%	22.4%	17.2%	17.2%	27.6%
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	14.2%	12.6%	35.5%	15.5%	22.3%
	SOMEWHAT AGREE	2.3%	5.8%	21.2%	29.0%	41.7%
	STRONGLY AGREE	2.0%	3.1%	9.3%	19.5%	66.1%

Table 14:

Some people say that Black people need their own political home. A Black political home would be an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree that Black people need their own political home or organization?		How much, if at all, do you think what happens to Black people in this country overall affects what happens in your own life?				
		NOT AT ALL	A LITTLE	A MODERATE AMOUNT	A LOT	A GREAT DEAL
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	10.0%	22.5%	10.0%	27.5%	30.0%
	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	15.5%	17.2%	27.6%	17.2%	22.4%
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	16.5%	12.9%	36.8%	17.1%	16.8%
	SOMEWHAT AGREE	3.5%	7.3%	30.5%	22.8%	35.9%
	STRONGLY AGREE	4.5%	3.9%	16.0%	18.0%	57.6%

Table 15:

Some people say that Black people need their own political home. A Black political home would be an organization for Black people to exercise and build electoral power, as well as harness the power of social movement action to build Black political power. What do you think? Do you agree or disagree that Black people need their own political home or organization?		How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "The political system is rigged against people like me."				
		STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	7.5%	17.5%	30.0%	10.0%	35.0%
	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	12.3%	21.1%	17.5%	33.3%	15.8%
	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	7.1%	19.4%	41.1%	18.8%	13.6%
	SOMEWHAT AGREE	4.2%	8.9%	25.5%	36.3%	25.1%
	STRONGLY AGREE	4.8%	3.7%	13.2%	25.4%	53.0%

These both make sense in that believing in the system being rigged, conditional on it having to do with being Black, would likely lead to someone believing that an independent Black political home would be worthwhile. And this relationship is corroborated in another way: When we asked a set of questions about what drives people to vote, the one that had the strongest relationship to the desire for a Black political home was the measure for voting being a way to help the Black community (see Figure 10). While this is not directly analogous to support for the BLM movement, all three measures are focused on the specificities of being Black, which tells us that the intuition of seeing a relationship between the desire for a Black political home and support for the movement is likely valid.

A political home for Black people was very popular among the young Black people surveyed, and it was tied to a strong sense of racial identity and belief in Black collective power. Also, the most important characteristics desired in a political home were inclusive of all Black people, the ability to influence elected officials in power, and deep engagement with community members.

Figure 10:
What characteristics do you think are important for the creation of a Black political organization/home?
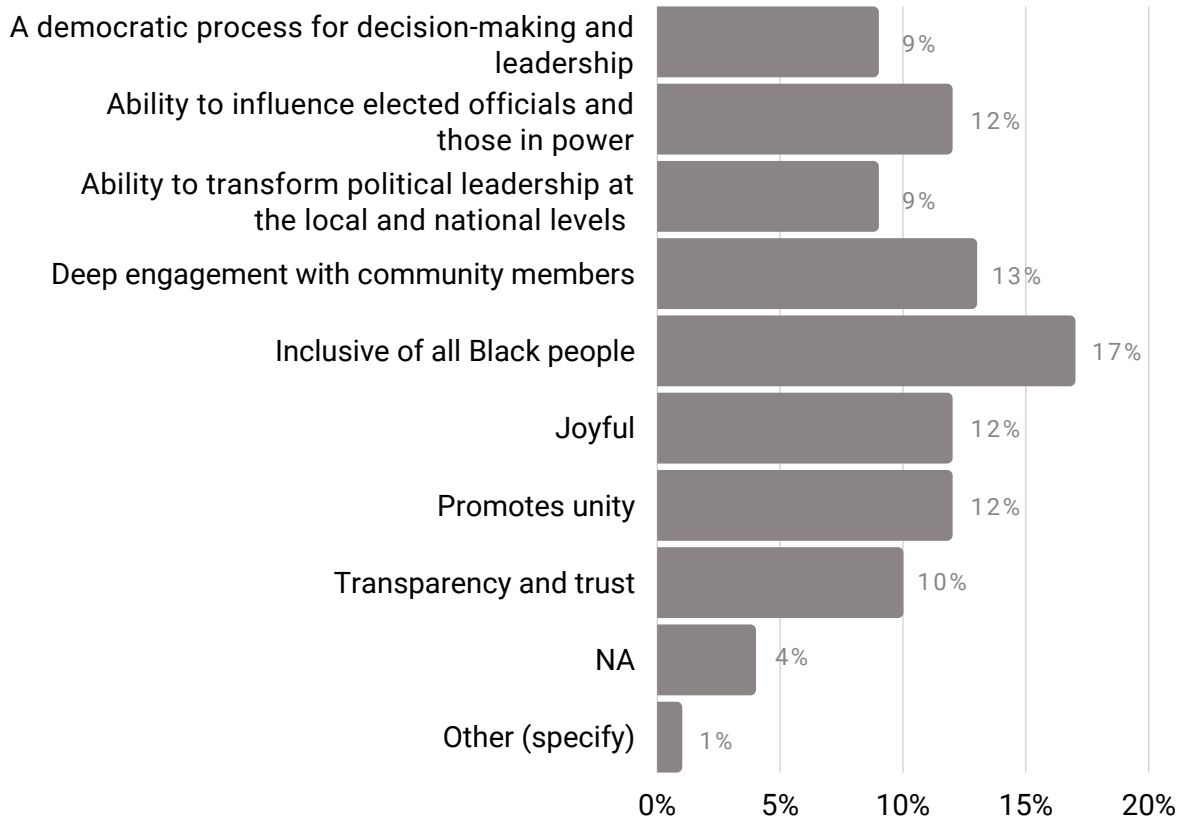
The major thread running through the project is that Black organizers and movement actors are critical of the existing electoral system and disillusioned by how it has historically and contemporarily failed Black people. Yet, with that deep critique, they also understand that politics, elections and voting are tools that they must use in a broader strategy to disrupt the system. **How they do that is by creating spaces that center community, celebrate and affirm Blackness, and understand and are responsive to the issues plaguing Black communities.** These spaces are premised on the idea that collective action taken with shared values creates Black political power. The electoral work does not look like traditional transactional electoral engagement – Black people are seen as more than votes. When entering communities that have long experienced structural injustice and harm, the electoral justice strategy must center love, joy and seeing people for their whole selves.

CONCLUSION AND OPPORTUNITIES

Black people's views, as always, are complicated and multifaceted, and knowing how to make sense of the nuance and intersectionality within the Black community is as important as ever. 2020 was a year of disruptions that had disproportionate impact on Black people - from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the continued and increased police violence targeting Black people. Yet, in a year of disruptions Black people still turned out to vote in record numbers and in ways that were decisive to the electoral outcomes in many states. This report begins to unpack this dichotomy of Black political disillusionment and continued civic participation.

Here, we find that the political alienation is as alive as ever, with a number of Black people feeling that the system is set up for them to fail. That said, this awareness of the structural features cannot be reduced to a dour sensibility of learned helplessness. Rather, our respondents were still by and large positive about the election, politics more generally, and their sense that things will get better and, ultimately, lead to equality for Black people in the country. In addition, we see that racism remains a strong and stubborn predictor of people's political participation, leading to a dramatically high number of people to vote and protest.
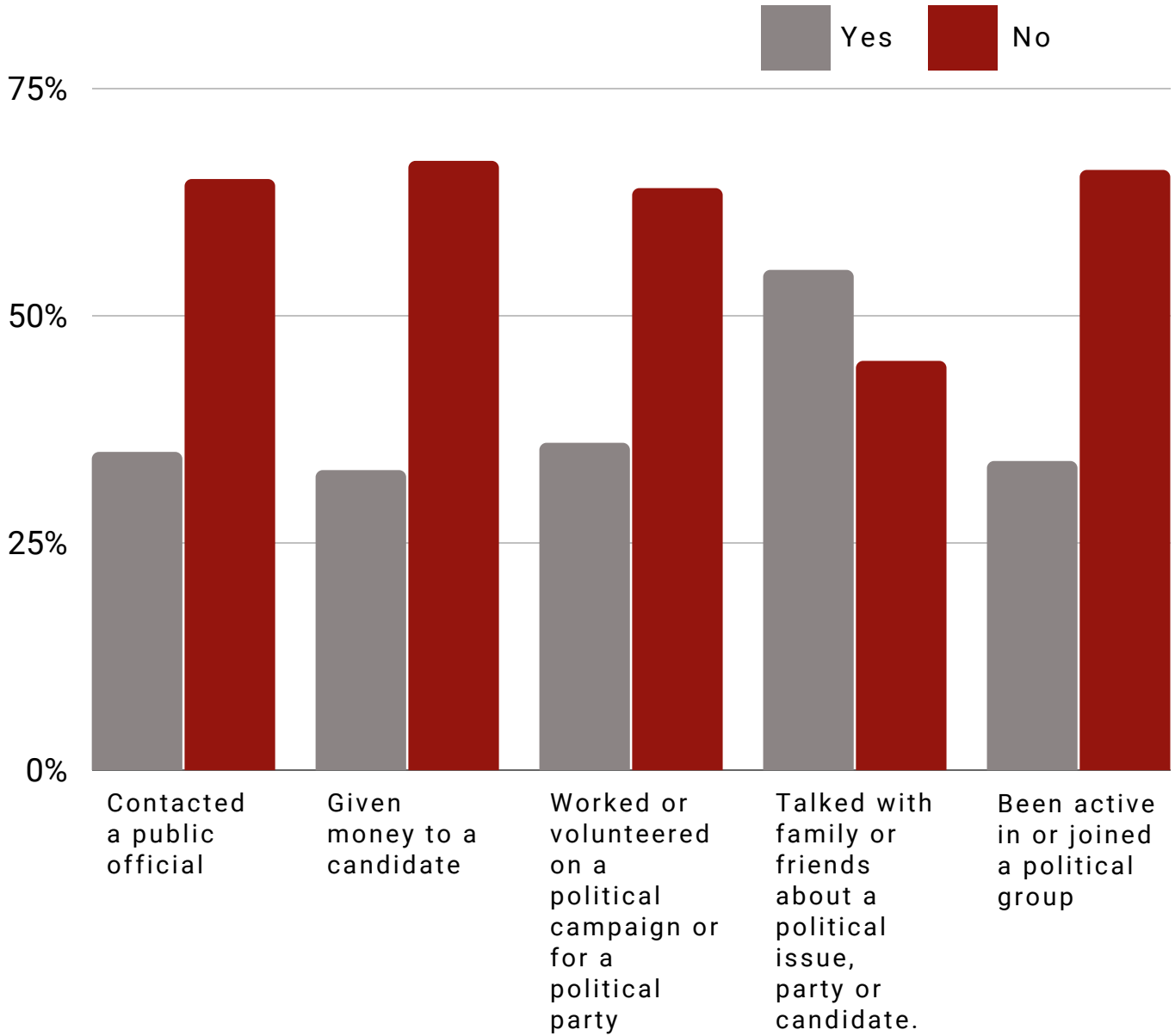
We also found that linked fate and a strong sense of racial identity and sense of social responsibility to the Black community increased all forms of political participation. Both in terms of voting and protest, although to different degrees, young Black people were moved to action by a sense of trying to create change for their community and Black people more broadly. These findings seem to suggest that young Black people are likely to be persuaded to action when they perceive those actions as a way to build collective power. We were not able to explore this in the survey data, but the qualitative research suggests that power in this sense is less connected to electoral outcomes and more about measurable outcomes that benefit or reduce harm to the Black community. Power is reflected in the ability to deliver immediate short-term policy wins, as well as more long-term systems change.

There is still much to be done, but this study has shown the power of hope, racial identity and community to understand Black political engagement. Also, the differences that moved individuals to vote and participate in protest were small. Movement organizing and electoral organizing are very much connected, where protest and social movements can create a connectedness that increases efficacy in the face of political cynicism.

The underlying lesson, especially from qualitative research, is that movement organizing allows individuals access to other tools of engagement beyond voting on a path toward political power. Movement spaces acknowledge that the existing systems have not been working and must be disrupted, which is important given the high level of political alienation that exists among young Black people - skipping over this point would likely seem inauthentic and disingenuous. Rather than skipping over the harm and exclusion that Black voters have historically experienced within the political system, movement organizers should acknowledge the truth and offer people a collective space to change it. In fact, in our survey of young Black people, when we asked respondents whether hearing about police killings of Black people change their interest in voting in any way, approximately 60% said it did changed their views on voting. Of those respondents, 61% said that hearing about police killings of Black people significantly or somewhat increased their interest in voting. In other words, young Black people are acutely aware of the harms and marginalization of Black people, which certainly feeds into a sense of alienation, but knowledge does not necessarily lead to disengagement from the political system. In fact, we find quite the opposite - that a sense of collective social responsibility may actually lead to increased political engagement in an effort to improve things for one's community. Movement organizations need not cede the political and electoral space but rather enable Black voters to create their own field of engagement. Electoral justice is not just about the act of voting; it means that there is organizing, mobilization and strategies to push for Black political power before, during and after elections.

Finally, the research suggests that creating a Black political movement that works at the intersection of movement and electoral politics is not only popular but can be a powerful tool. Young black people are looking for spaces that empower them to push for wins that provide immediate relief from harm for Black people while also working to transform the current political structure. The growth of electoral movement organizations and coalitions, such as The Frontline, Working Families Party, Black Voters Matter, and M4BL Electoral Justice project can be powerful spaces to increase young Black people's sense of efficacy and ultimately their political engagement in various ways through voting, protest and other forms of civic action.

APPENDIX

Figure A1:
Thinking about the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?

Figure A2:
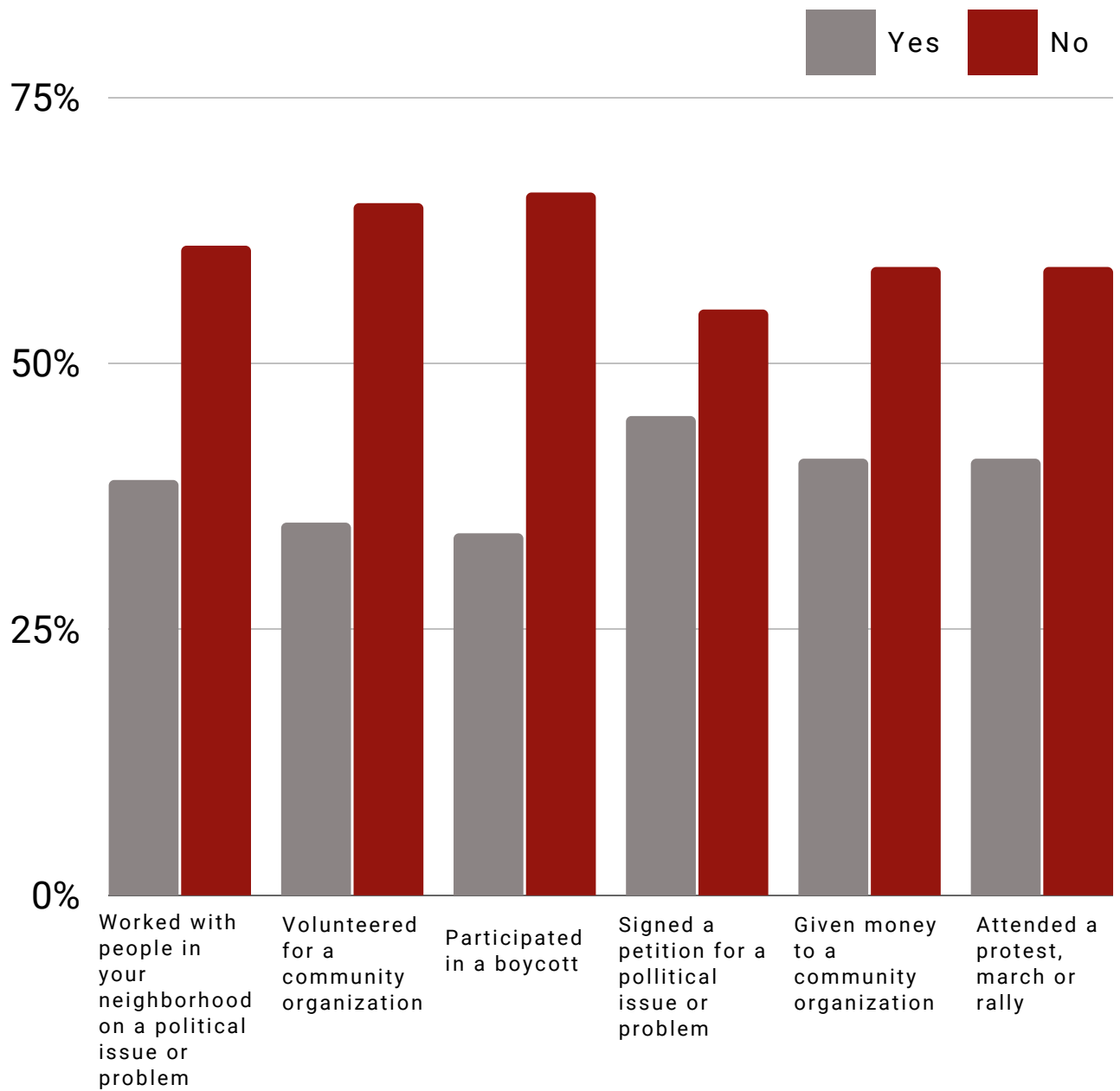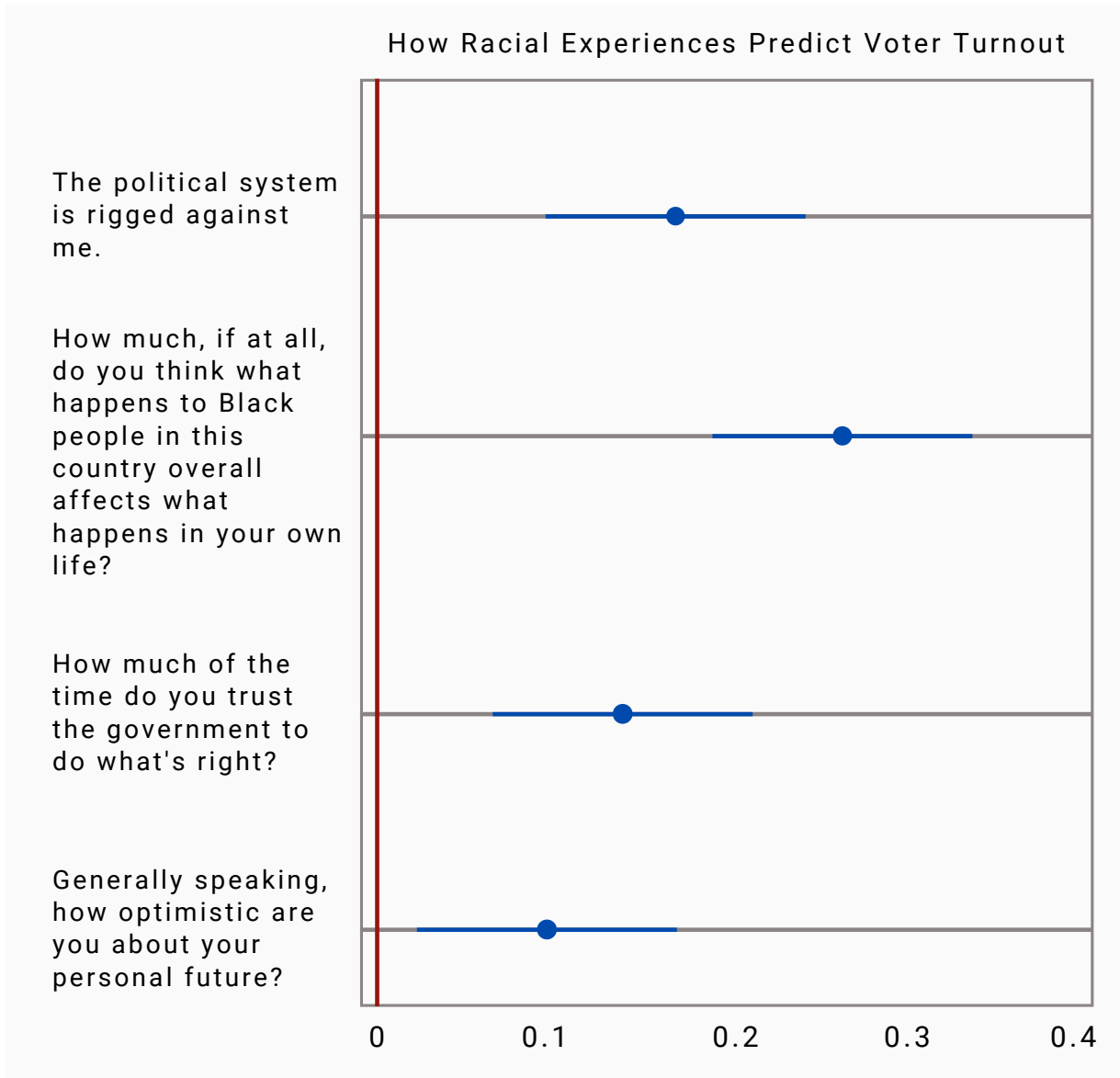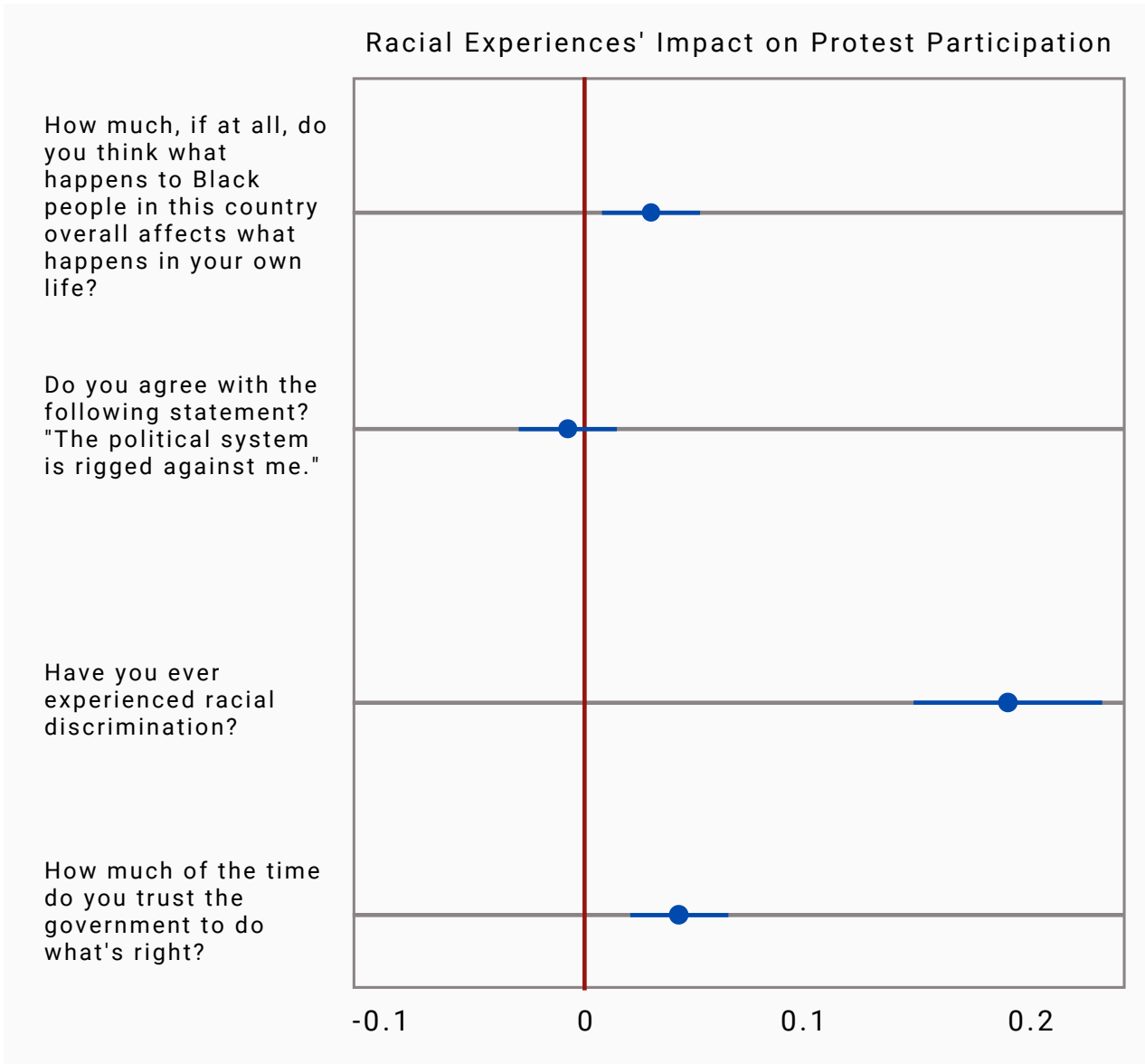**Thinking about the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?**

Legend: Yes (gray), No (dark red)

Categories: Worked with people in your neighborhood on a political issue or problem; Volunteered for a community organization; Participated in a boycott; Signed a petition for a pollitical issue or problem; Given money to a community organization; Attended a protest, march or rally

Figure A3:

How Racial Experiences Predict Voter Turnout

Figure A4:

Racial Experiences' Impact on Protest Participation

Table A1: Focus Group Respondents' Political Home Qualities and Strategies

QUALITIES OF A BLACK POLITICAL HOME

- Inclusive of all Black identities
- Basic survival guaranteed
- Politics important, but social needs and overall well-being also equally prioritized
- Collective healing of trauma
- Militant
- Robust community engagement and participation
- Ability to be heard by those in power
- All Black people have access to political knowledge

- Transformed political leadership (effective and informed) and institutions
- Takes the form of an organization, a political party, land or a separate country
- Marginalized communities within Black people possessing equal power, e.g., Black transwomen
- Joy
- Unity, consistency and transparency

STRATEGIES TOWARD A BLACK POLITICAL HOME

- Reconciling of political ideologies among Black people to determine who is welcome in this political home
- Emphasis on historical analysis and making information on policy and politics accessible to all
- Members of the Black community, outside of the election cycle
- Elimination of class structures and respectability politics
- Storytelling long-term organizing efforts
- Technology as a tool
- Procurement of space/land and funding

- Deliberate "what is the dream?" "what is the vision?"
- Community agreements on how to treat each other
- Demoratic participatory process to determine what the ideology is, if any
- Providing everyone therapy to address deep-rooted and ongoing oppression, including a trauma therapist and a sex therapist
- Infiltrating the current system and getting rid of the current people in power

WHY BLACK A POLITICAL HOME IS URGENT

- A need for Black people to have spaces where they can "conspire to dream" and ask questions that push forward the conversation
- A need for self-sustainability, safety and rest
- A literal matter of life and death
- Governance that is not dependent upon white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy or misogyny
- Currently, no "black space" that focuses on all aspects of repairing impact of oppression
- "What does it look like to have Black children in different spaces … and not programming them for prison?" – Oakland FG respondent
- Space to dream with other Black people and push the conversation forward; hard to dream and heal when still in systems of oppression