

# **GROWING AND DIVERSIFYING YOUTH CLIMATE ACTIVISM**

Challenges, Strategies, and Pathways  
to Electoral Participation

# INTRODUCTION

Climate activism can serve as a pathway for young people to develop as civic actors, leading to voting and to other forms of participation.

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and Action for the Climate Emergency (ACE) partnered to **examine how climate-focused organizations can reach a wider diversity of young people, both to strengthen their efforts and to deepen youth civic and political engagement.**

This brief presents findings from a survey of 3,451 young people, ages 14-25, who had recently joined ACE through ad-based recruitment or were ACE members who had been inactive for the past 12 months. 76% of participants are from eight states where ACE is largely focused: FL, TX, NC, OH, PA, AZ, WI, and NV – with more than a third from Florida and Texas alone.

## ABOUT CIRCLE

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

## ABOUT ACE

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

Climate action can take many forms. In the survey, we asked youth if they had participated in the following climate actions:



Signed a petition



Had a conversation with a friend or family member



Contacted an elected official



Attended or spoke at a public meeting



Participated in a community event or protest/demonstration



Planned an event (online or in-person) in your school or community



Used social media to inform, engage, or invite people to take action

# YOUTH ARE TAKING CLIMATE ACTION AND...

There are opportunities to increase access for some youth

Rates of taking climate action were lower for some groups, even after accounting for the skills that they bring to climate action (discussed below). This suggests that they prefer different activities or face barriers to taking action:



**Age:** The **youngest respondents (ages 14-19)** were more likely than their slightly older peers (ages 20-24) to sign petitions, plan events, and use social media to inform and engage. Peer support and support from educational institutions may differ among age groups, while being key for a variety of climate actions.



**Gender:** **Non-binary youth and women** were more likely than men to sign petitions, have conversations, and use social media. **Non-binary youth were also more likely than other youth to contact an elected official.** There may be opportunities to increase participation across all youth by exploring how non-binary youth and women find entry points into climate action, perhaps through involvement in other issue-based organizing spaces.



**Race/Ethnicity:** Black youth and other youth members of communities of color<sup>1</sup> were less likely than white youth to sign petitions, have conversations with family and peers, and use social media to engage. Black youth were also less likely to contact an elected official. Hispanic/Latino youth were less likely than white youth to have conversations. **All youth of color were more likely than white youth to plan events** on climate and environmental issues. This is an opportunity to think about how to replicate the relational aspects of events in ways that invite a wider diversity of youth to take additional action.



**Political Ideology & Party Affiliation:** **Liberals** were most likely to sign petitions, have conversations, contact elected officials, and use social media compared to conservatives, moderate youth, and youth who don't know their political ideology. However, **conservative youth and youth in the middle were more likely to plan events than liberals.** In terms of party affiliation, Republicans had lower rates of participating in an event and speaking at a public hearing than Democrats. Youth who identify with a third party were more likely to sign petitions than Democrats. This may be an opportunity to think about whether and how invitations to take action are targeted at a broad group of youth.



**Geography:** Respondents **living in rural areas** were less likely to have conversations. To empower rural youth to take climate action, it may be beneficial to provide experiences that give them the skills and resources needed to feel comfortable speaking with others.

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



The geographic distribution of our survey sample also suggests major challenges to engaging young people in suburban and, especially, rural areas through broadly targeted digital ads. We used respondents' zip codes to determine the population density of the county in which they lived. We found that a majority of participants (76%) lived in urban areas and only 5% of youth in our sample lived in suburban areas. Less than 1% lived in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Previous CIRCLE research has demonstrated that youth in areas with lower population density are less likely to put climate and the environment in their top 3 issues. Many rural youth are also in "[civic deserts](#)" where there are fewer institutional opportunities and resources for civic engagement.

<sup>2</sup> The remaining 18% of youth had missing or incorrect zip codes and their area could not be determined.

# VARIOUS SKILLS ARE INVOLVED WHEN YOUTH TAKE ACTION

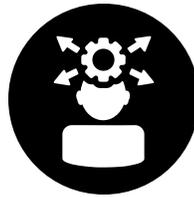
There are opportunities to strengthen skills for some youth

We explored what abilities and strengths help young people take climate action, in order to imagine how organizations can instill those skills and extend those support systems to more and more diverse young people. We asked survey respondents to consider the different climate actions listed above and identify the skills needed to take each action. The skills included:



## Readiness

Ability to present and discuss information, and to inspire others to do actions



## Efficacy

Having the knowledge, skills, and availability to do the action



## Motivation

Having the reasons and the support to do the action

Our analysis found that the **most common actions identified (signing a petition or having a conversation) involved readiness and either efficacy or motivation**, while **higher-effort actions (participating in or planning events) required efficacy and motivation** but not readiness. Using social media was related to all three skills.

There were no differences in skills by race. However, men, conservatives, those who don't know their political ideology, Republicans, and those with no party affiliation had lower motivation and readiness.



# CLIMATE ACTIVISM...

Has strong connections to youth voting in the 2022 election

Election cycles provide valuable opportunities to draw direct connections for youth between the issues they care about and the politicians and policies on the ballot. We found that 18-to 25-year-olds who had taken an above-average number of climate actions in the past year said they were more likely to vote in the 2022

elections than youth who took few climate actions. This relationship holds for youth who are not affiliated with a political party, a segment of the electorate often ignored by political campaigns that, if reached out to, may be ready to vote to effect change on issues like climate.



**The positive relationship between climate activism and likelihood to vote also suggests opportunities to grow voters**, even among youth who have not yet turned 18. Young people who have not reached voting age can talk to their friends and family about political issues, post online about elections, and

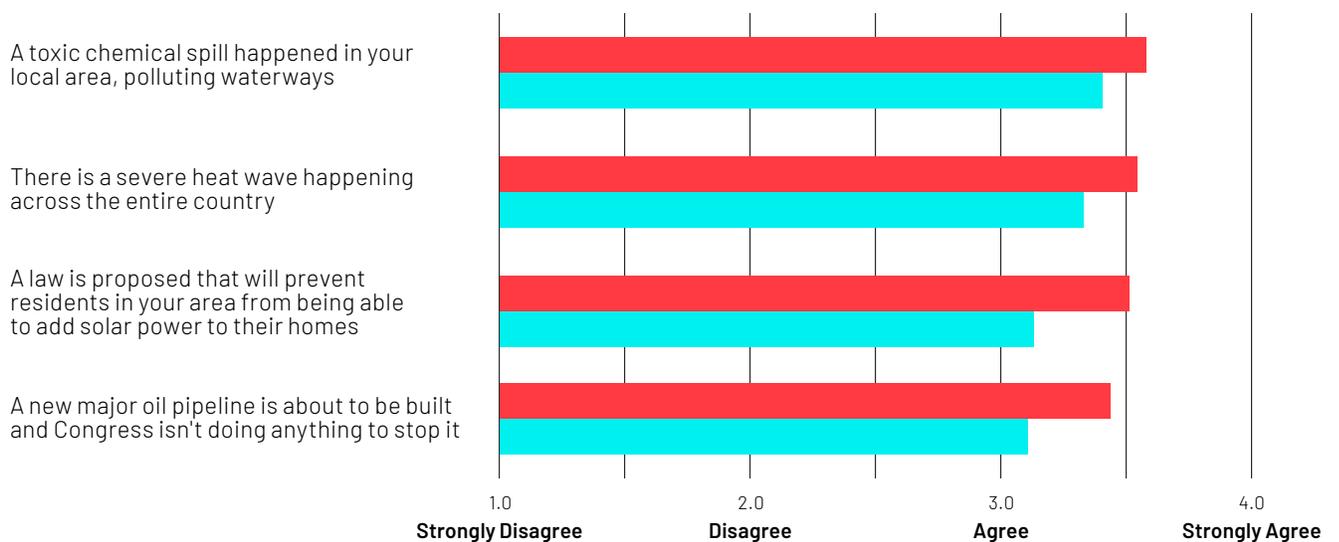
support their older peers with registration. For campaigns and organizations, this may mean there is a segment of the future electorate eager to pre-register to vote, volunteer for campaigns, and engage their peers within issue organizing spaces.

# CLIMATE SCENARIOS OFFER INSIGHTS INTO WHAT DRAWS YOUTH IN

Climate organizations and other issue-focused groups should also consider the messages and situations that resonate most with youth.

I would participate more in actions on climate and environmental issues because of what is happening in this scenario.

● More Engaged Youth    ● Disengaged Youth



Though more engaged youth said they were more likely to take action based on all four scenarios, the first two **scenarios related to a chemical spill in their local area and a heat wave were the most likely to motivate all youth to act.** It is possible young people can more easily imagine the impact on their lives of these two scenarios, compared to the more policy-focused scenarios related to proposed legislation and Congressional approval of a pipeline. We believe there are potential lessons here in how organizations can frame climate issues in ways that will spur young people to action.