



Distress and Desires—United States Youth on Sustainability, Social Justice, Climate Change and the Role of Higher Education

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Methodology Snapshot

The Institute for Sustainability & Social Justice at Sacred Heart University (Fairfield, CT) in partnership with GreatBlue Research (Glastonbury, CT) developed and conducted this survey to surface the perceptions of United States youth on the intertwined topics of sustainability, social justice, climate change and the role and responsibility of higher education in these areas. We surveyed a random sample of 2,000 U.S. residents aged 15-29. The sample was stratified by gender, age and geographic region to ensure broad representation. Results were weighted to U.S. census data for age and race. The survey was fielded from July 29, 2024 to August 5, 2024.

Details of the methodology can be found at the end of this report [here](#). Poll questions and response frequencies are available by request—please contact Kirk Bartholomew by email at: bartholomewk@sacredheart.edu

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Introduction

In light of increasing national and global perceptions of a world on an unsustainable and unjust path, coupled with calls for higher education institutions to increase their engagement with sustainability and social justice, the newly formed Institute for Sustainability & Social Justice at Sacred Heart University partnered with GreatBlue Research in a poll of **United States youth** (ages 15-29) to surface their perceptions and opinions on the intertwined topics of *sustainability*, *social justice* and *climate change*—and in particular the **role and responsibility of higher education institutions** in these areas.

The findings reveal a generation in which more than 50% of U.S. youth are experiencing a level of eco-anxiety that is impacting their daily lives. Across U.S. census regions, youth reported high and surprisingly similar levels of importance for issues of sustainability, social justice and climate change. A majority feel a sense of individual responsibility to act but have little confidence in the impact of their actions. Youth highlighted higher ed as having an important role to play in teaching the capacities of caring and consciousness/awareness/mindfulness, which were highly rated as important capacities for solving the problems of sustainability and social justice. The authors suggest that the disconnect between youth's feeling of individual responsibility for action on climate change, but lack of impact may be an additional area for higher ed instruction on the power of collective action.

Major Findings: Highlights

* See **Major Findings** section for additional detail, data tables and charts.

U.S. Youth and Climate Change: Distress and Worry

- **Greater than one-in-two U.S. youth report eco-anxiety:** More than half of U.S. youth report experiencing “eco-anxiety” defined as, “My level of concern for climate change causes psychological distress that impacts my daily life.”
- **Nearly three-in-four U.S. youth worry about climate change:** Results show 74% agree or somewhat agree with the statement, “I am personally worried about climate change.”
- **Nine-in-ten U.S. youth agree that climate change is happening:** Differences exist in the recognized cause of climate change—“human activity” (six-in-ten) vs “natural changes in the environment” (three-in-ten).

Not as Regionally Divided as We Seem

- **Eco-anxiety is everywhere:** More than half of U.S. youth report eco-anxiety in all U.S. census regions.
- **Individuals should take action:** Across all census regions nearly eight-in-ten U.S. youth expressed the consistent view that individuals should take “a lot” or “some” responsibility to address climate change.
- **Our actions are not effective:** Across all U.S. census regions nearly six-in-ten U.S. youth believe that an individual’s actions would be “very limited” or “not effective” in tackling climate change.
- **Voting on sustainability, social justice and climate change:** Around 35% of U.S. youth in all census regions would take action in the next 6 months by voting for candidates who support their positions on issues of sustainability, social justice and/or climate change.
- **Inner capacities are important, and colleges and universities should teach them:** Across all U.S. census regions nearly eight-in-ten U.S. youth rate inner capacities as important for solving problems of sustainability and social justice (i.e. “caring” and “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness”).
- **Perception of colleges and universities regarding sustainability and social justice:** Across U.S. census regions, 18-29-year-olds gave high importance to the idea that colleges and universities should teach about sustainability and social justice, and felt that colleges and universities were integrating sustainability and social justice principles into their organizations.

U.S. Youth Wants and Expectations for Higher Education

- **U.S. colleges and universities should teach caring and consciousness:** Around eight-in-ten U.S. youth report that colleges and universities teaching the capacities of “caring” and “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness” are important for solving problems of sustainability and social justice.
- **Sustainability and social justice issues and action are important to teach:** Nearly three-in-four U.S. youth rank colleges and universities teaching about issues of sustainability and social justice and how to take action as important.

- **Rating higher education on sustainability and social justice, room for improvement:** While about two-thirds of U.S. youth feel that colleges and universities are performing at least somewhat well in both providing opportunities to learn about sustainability and social justice (67%) and integrating sustainability and social justice practices into their organizations (65%), at least one-in-four indicate the opposite and only two-in-ten would give colleges and universities a “very well” rating in response to these questions.
- **Ranking educational and experiential activities for climate change education:** Experiential and engaged instructional activities receive high levels of support from U.S. youth as interesting activities for inclusion in course work on climate change.

Opportunities for Higher Education to Close Disconnects: Responsibility vs Action

- **High responsibility, low confidence:** While most U.S. youth believe they have an individual responsibility to address climate change, nearly six-in-ten supported statements that individual actions will have limited or no effect.
- **Individual actions taken collectively seen as ineffective:** Less than two-in-ten U.S. youth took the position that collective individual actions would lead to significant improvements in tackling climate change.
- **U.S. youth’s confidence to take effective action high:** In contrast to the low rating on effectiveness of individual action, approximately seven-in-ten U.S. youth believe they have the ability to take effective action on issues of sustainability, social justice and climate change.
- **Over 50% of U.S. youth consider sustainability and social justice as relevant to their lives:** Slightly more than one-in-two U.S. youth consider sustainability and social justice issues as relevant to their future employment and personal lives.
- **Drivers and barriers to action:** U.S. youth are motivated by a mix of personal values and future-oriented concepts to act on issues of sustainability and social justice. The barriers that were highest rated were “financial resources” (39%), “lack of knowledge” (35%) and “ineffectiveness of individual action” (33%).
- **Willingness to take specific actions low:** No provided actions to address sustainability and social justice received majority support from U.S. youth. The highest-ranking actions where nearly four-in-ten indicated willingness were: “cut consumption and waste,” “reduce carbon footprint/environmental impact” and “vote for candidates who support my position on these issues.”
- **Opportunities for recruitment:** Nearly three-in-five U.S. youth say that they either currently are or would have been “more likely” to apply to a college or university that offered a program focused on sustainability and social justice.
- **Roles for higher education:** U.S. youth indicate a wide range of roles that they want colleges and universities to play in preparing their students for the challenges of climate change—providing opportunities for education and awareness, research and innovation, and community engagement/climate action were rated highest.
- **Colleges and universities can benefit local communities:** Nearly nine-in-ten U.S. youth indicate a beneficial role for universities engaging with their local communities to address issues of sustainability and social justice.
- **Preference for government action:** Respondents place primary responsibility for addressing these issues on federal and state governments, with less emphasis on educational institutions or religious organizations.

Understanding of Social Justice & Sustainability Among U.S. Youth

- **Intersectionality in youth perspectives:** Over nine-in-ten U.S. youth agree that sustainability and social justice are at least somewhat intertwined. Greater than seven-in-ten also report that they are aware of the connections between sustainability, social justice and climate change.
- **Expanding the definition of sustainability:** Without a provided definition, U.S. youth primarily associated sustainability with environmental concepts like “affordable and clean energy” and “clean water and sanitation.” However, when provided with a holistic and inclusive definition of sustainability, they shifted to include issues associated with justice and equality like: “reduced inequalities,” “decent work and economic growth” and “no poverty.”
- **Sustainability and social justice awareness and importance:** The vast majority of U.S. youth indicated familiarity with sustainability and social justice as concepts and that sustainability and social justice were “important.” Familiarity with international sustainability and social justice frameworks and calls to action were generally low.
- **Community consensus on sustainability, social justice and climate change:** Most youth believe there is a consensus between their own views and those of their friends, family and community on issues related to sustainability, social justice and climate change.

U.S. Youth Voting

- **Biden’s withdrawal quickly spurs increased youth engagement:** In this poll fielded between eight and eleven days after Biden’s withdrawal from the presidential election, nearly four-in-ten U.S. youth indicated increased support for the democratic candidate, while one quarter of U.S. youth indicated increased support for the republican candidate.
- **High registration middling intentions:** While eight-in-ten U.S. youth are registered to vote, only around five-in-ten reported a high-likelihood of voting at the time of this poll.

Major Findings

U.S. Youth and Climate Change: Distress and Worry

- **Greater than one-in-two U.S. youth report eco-anxiety:** More than half of U.S. youth report experiencing “eco-anxiety” defined as, “My level of concern for climate change causes psychological distress that impacts my daily life.”
- **Nearly three-in-four U.S. youth worry about climate change:** Seventy-four percent agree or somewhat agree with the statement, “I am personally worried about climate change.”
- **Nine-in-ten U.S. youth agree that climate change is happening:** Differences exist in the recognized cause of climate change—“human activity” (six-in-ten) vs “natural changes in the environment” (three-in-ten).

Benchmarking climate change concerns and awareness

Almost three-in-four U.S. youth are personally worried about climate change (74%), with 55% going on to say they have experienced “eco-anxiety” defined as, “My level of concern for climate change causes psychological distress that impacts my daily life.” Greater than eight-in-ten indicate that they are worried about the impacts of climate concerns on future generations (82%). Additionally:

- 25-29-year-olds are more likely to have experienced *eco-anxiety* (58% vs. 49%) and are more likely to be personally worried about climate change compared to 15-17-year-olds.
- Fears over climate change’s *impact on the economy* also increased among respondents ages 22-24 (77%) and 25-29 (81%) compared to respondents 15-17 (70%) and 18-21 (70%).

QUESTION: Thinking specifically about climate change, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

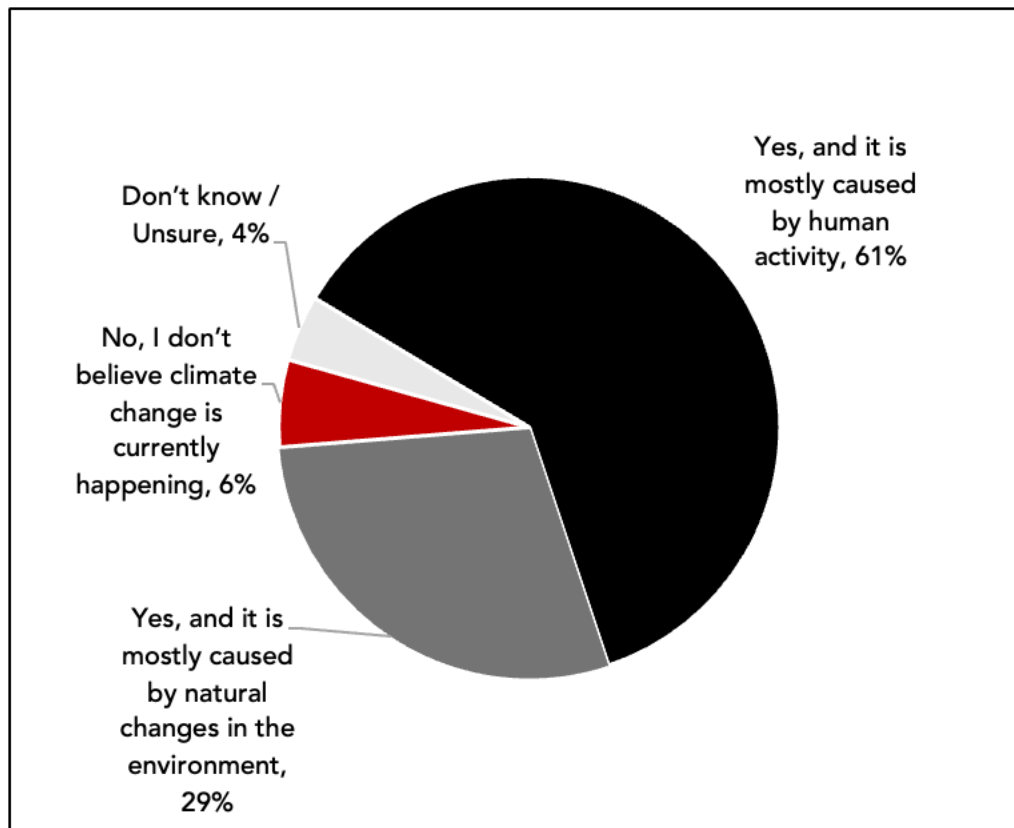
Concerns over Climate Change...	Strongly/Somewhat Agree (August 2024)
I am worried about the impacts of climate change on future generations	82%
I am worried about the impacts of climate change on society	79%
I am worried about the impacts of climate change on my future quality of life	77%
Climate change is important to me	76%
I am worried about the impacts of climate change on the economy	75%
I am worried about the impacts of climate change on my family	74%
I am personally worried about climate change	74%

Concerns over Climate Change...	Strongly/Somewhat Agree (August 2024)
I am worried about being harmed by climate change	73%
I experience “eco-anxiety” (my level of concern for climate change causes psychological distress that impacts my daily life.)	55%

Climate change is happening

Over 90% of U.S. youth believe that climate change is happening now; although nearly three-in-ten do not accept the scientific consensus that human activities are driving the current episode of rapid climate change that Earth is experiencing.

QUESTION: To begin, do you believe climate change is currently happening? If so, what do you believe is the primary cause?



Not as Regionally Divided as We Seem

- **Eco-anxiety is everywhere:** More than half of U.S. youth report eco-anxiety in all U.S. census regions.
- **Individuals should take action:** Across all census regions nearly eight-in-ten U.S. youth expressed the consistent view that individuals should take “a lot” or “some” responsibility to address climate change.
- **Our actions are not effective:** Across all U.S. census regions nearly six-in-ten U.S. youth believe that an individual’s actions would be “very limited” or “not effective” in tackling climate change.
- **Voting on sustainability, social justice and climate change:** Around 35% of U.S. youth in all census regions would take action in the next 6 months by voting for candidates who support their positions on issues of sustainability, social justice and/or climate change.
- **Inner capacities are important, and colleges and universities should teach them:** Across all U.S. census regions nearly eight-in-ten U.S. youth rate inner capacities as important for solving problems of sustainability and social justice (i.e. “caring” and “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness”).
- **Perception of colleges and universities regarding sustainability and social justice:** Across U.S. census regions, 18-29-year-olds gave high importance to the idea that colleges and

universities should teach about sustainability and social justice and felt that colleges and universities were integrating sustainability and social justice principles into their organizations.

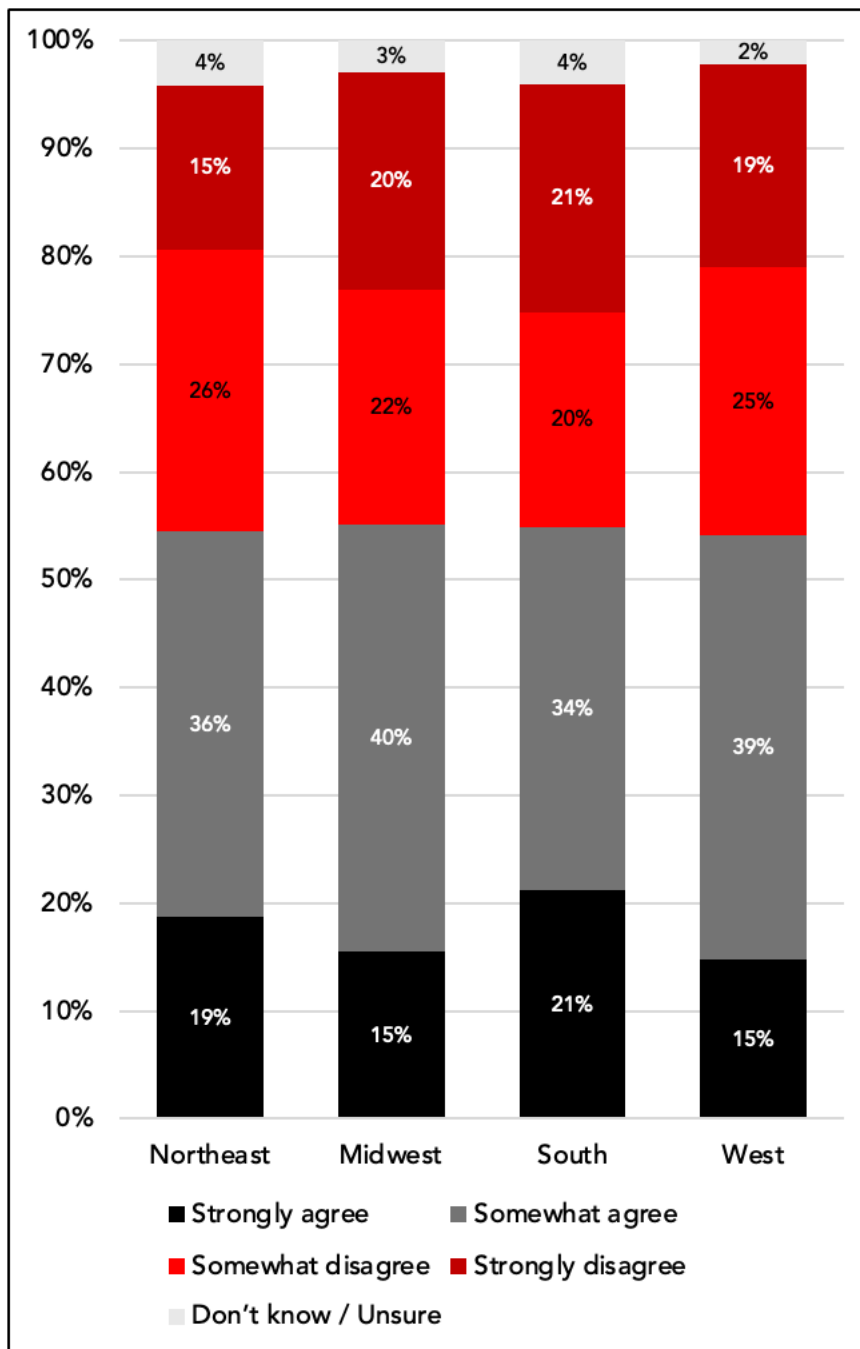
The sample for this poll closely mirrored the most recent U.S. Census Bureau population percentages by region. No additional weights were applied for our regional analysis.

Region	U.S Census Bureau Population Estimate (2023)	Our Poll
Northeast	17%	16.8%
Midwest	20.6%	19.1%
West	23.6%	22.3%
South	38.9%	41.8%

Eco-anxiety is everywhere

Very similar reports of “eco-anxiety” in all U.S. census regions, 55% of U.S. youth in the Northeast, compared to 55% in the Midwest, 54% in the West and 55% in the South indicated experiencing “eco-anxiety.”

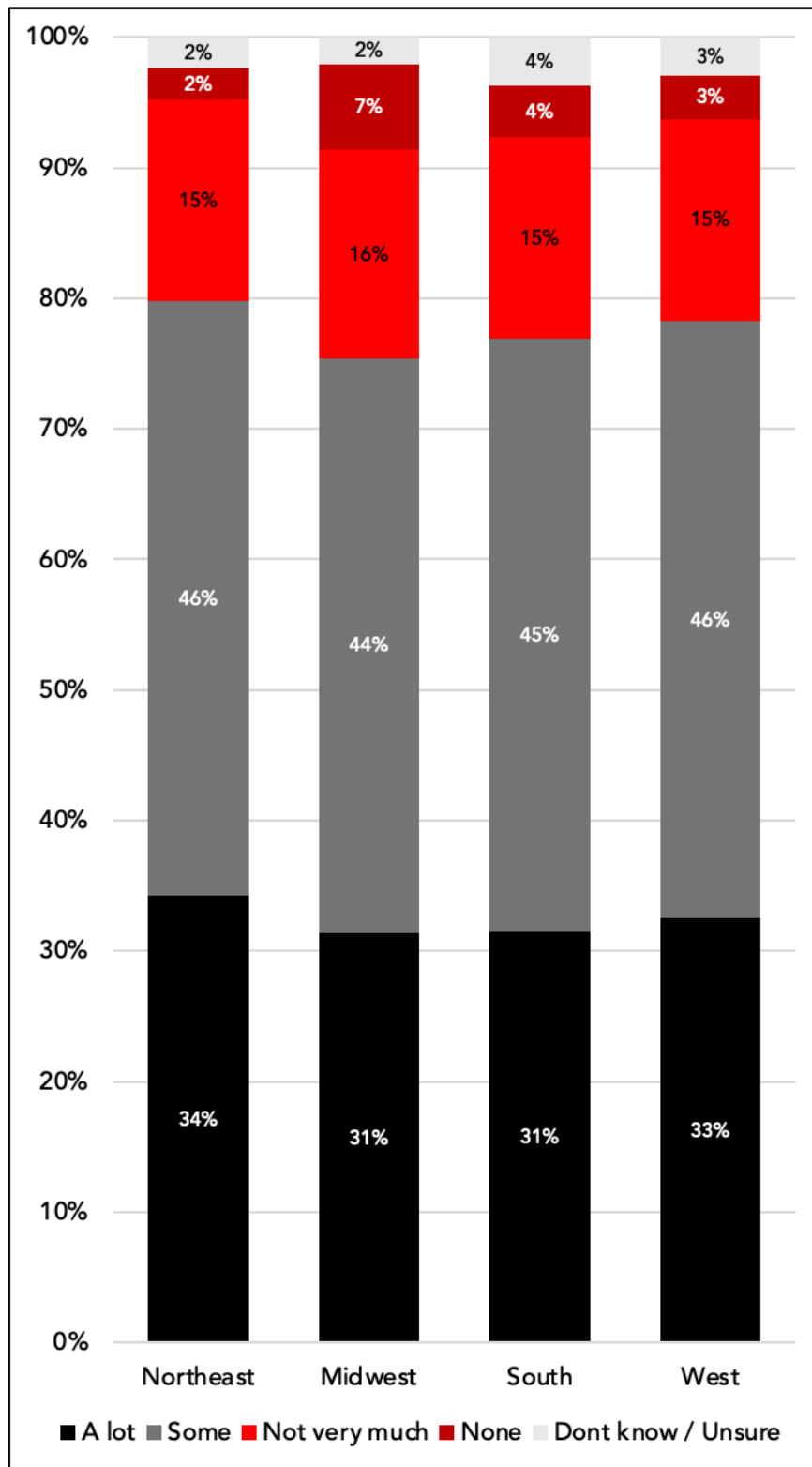
QUESTION: Thinking specifically about climate change, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Showing “I experience ‘eco-anxiety’ (my level of concern for climate change causes psychological distress that impacts my daily life).”



Individuals should act

Across all census regions U.S. youth views expressed consistent views as to how much responsibility individuals should take to address climate change: 80% in the Northeast, 75% in the Midwest, 77% in the South and 78% of U.S. youths in the West region all said individuals should take “a lot” or “some” action in tackling climate change.

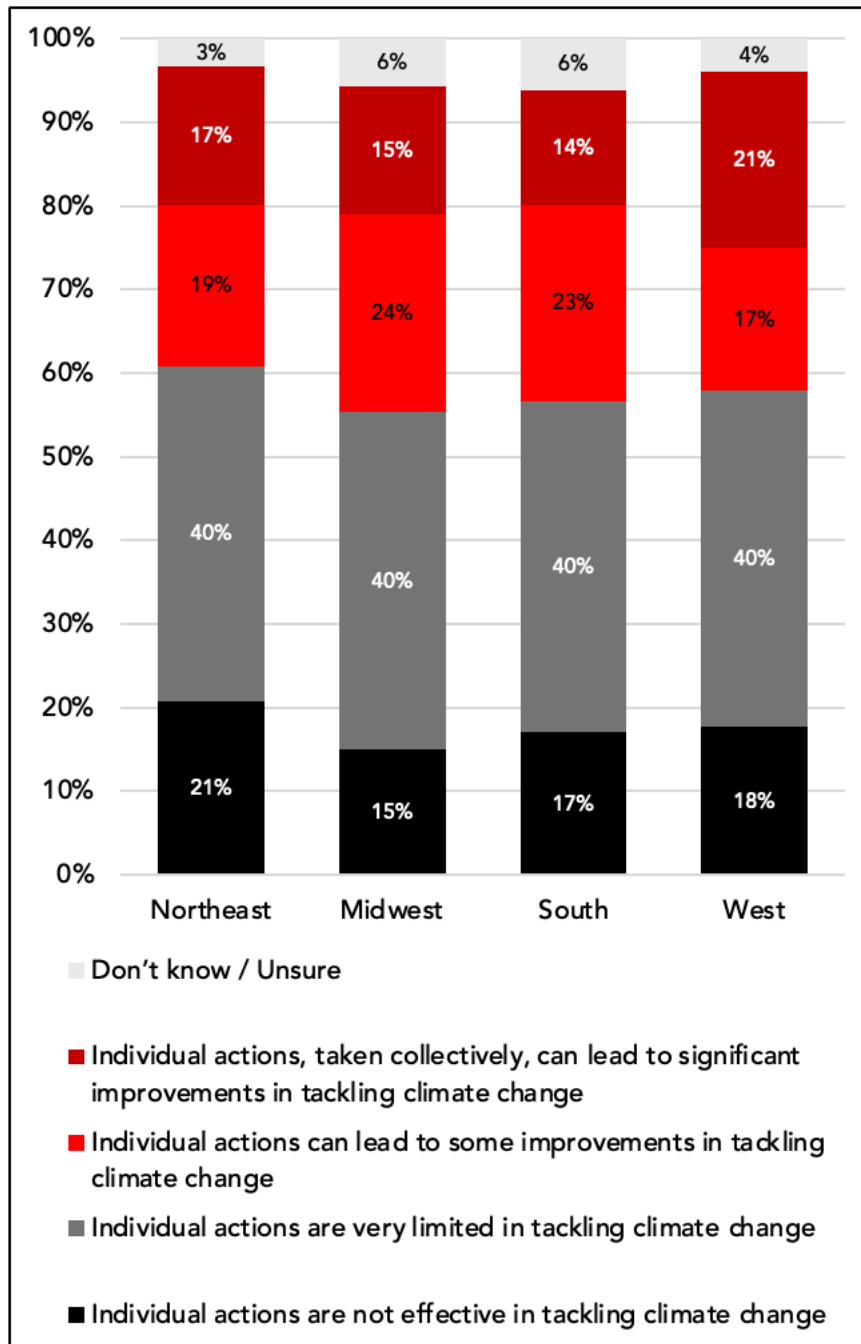
QUESTION: How much responsibility should individuals take for addressing climate change?



Our actions are not effective

Across census regions U.S. youth indicated their perception that individual actions would be “very limited” in tackling climate change—40% for all regions.

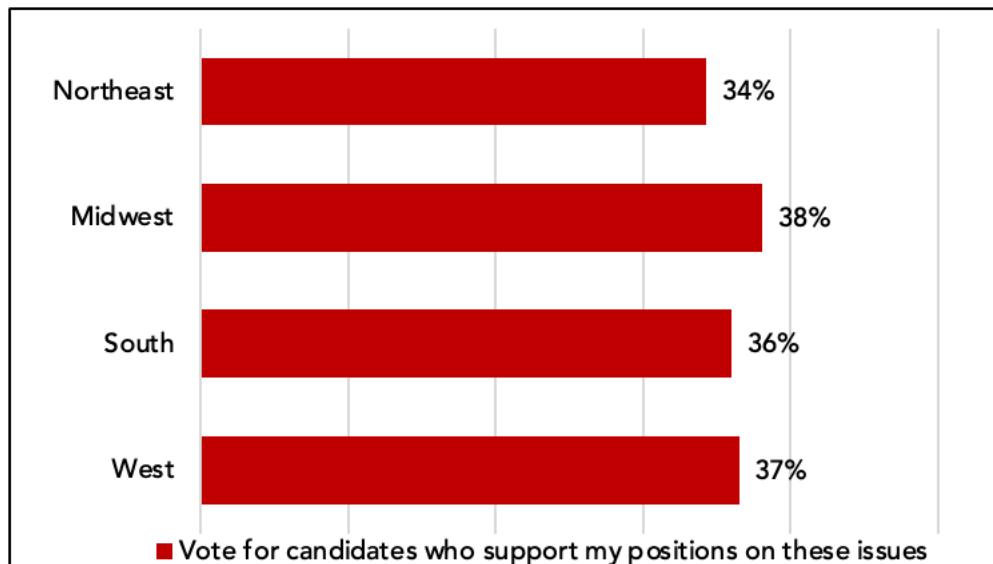
QUESTION: Which position most closely reflects your view on the effectiveness of individual actions in tackling climate change? Please select the position that best represents your opinion.



Voting behavior consistent

Similar percentages of U.S. youths in all census regions indicated a willingness to take action by voting for candidates who support their positions on climate change, sustainability and/or social justice issues. 34% in the Northeast, 38% in the Midwest, 37% in the West and 36% in the South said they would vote for candidates based on these issues in the next 6 months.

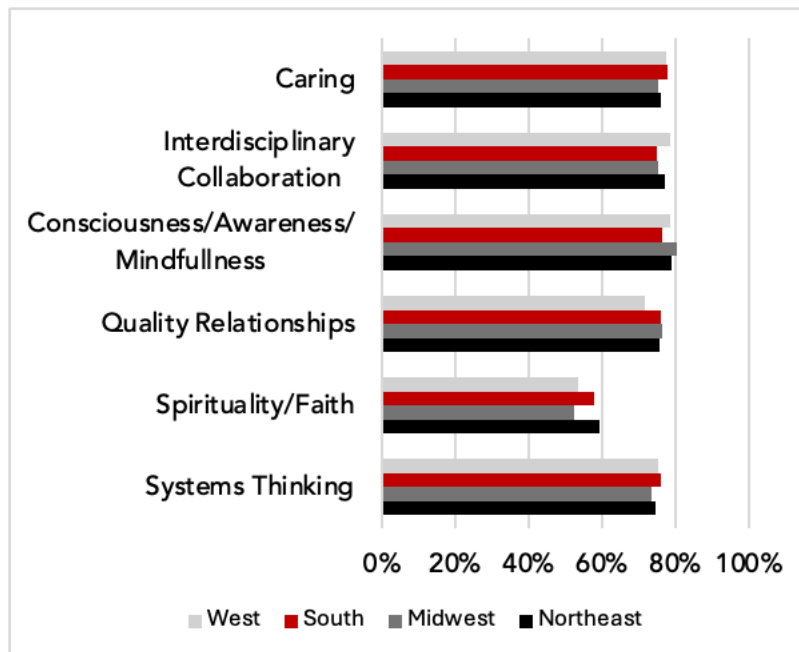
QUESTION: Finally, which, if any, of the following **actions or steps** would you be willing to take in your personal life to help address climate change, sustainability and/or social justice issues in the next six months? Please select all that apply. (Showing only “Vote for candidates who support my positions on these issues.”)



Inner capacities are important

There was relative consistency across U.S. census regions in the perceived importance of “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness,” as a capacity important for colleges and universities to teach to solve problems of sustainability and social justice: 81% of U.S. youth in the Northeast, 80% in the Midwest, 77% in the West and 77% in the South, indicated the importance of this capacity. Similar consistency across regions was observed in U.S. youth ratings of the importance of “caring,” “interdisciplinary thinking,” “interdisciplinary collaboration,” “quality relationships,” “spirituality/faith” and “systems thinking.” U.S. youth’s rating for the capacity of “spirituality/faith” was 10-15% lower than the other capacities measured.

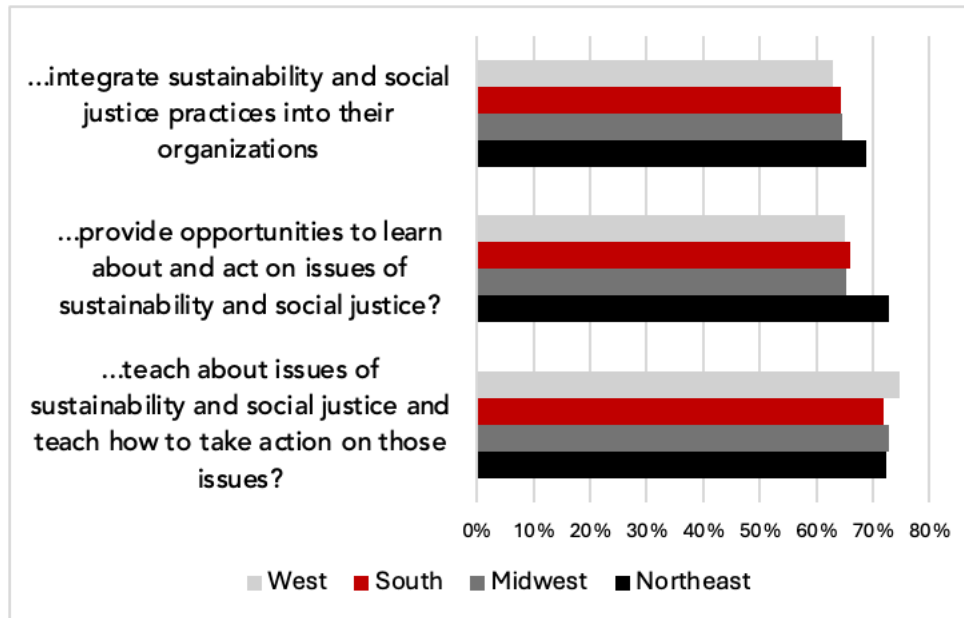
QUESTION: How important is it for colleges and universities to teach these capacities? Showing very important/important.



Perception of colleges and universities regarding sustainability & social justice

There was relative consistency in all U.S. census regions in U.S. youths rating the importance of colleges and universities teaching about sustainability and social justice and in their ratings about the performance of colleges and universities providing opportunities to learn about sustainability and social justice and in integrating sustainability and social justice principles into their organizations. For example, 73% in the Northeast, 65% in the Midwest, 66% in the South and 65% in the West region indicated colleges and universities are doing at least “well” in providing opportunities to learn about and act on issues of sustainability and social justice.

QUESTION(S): Based on your experience or all you know and have heard, how well do colleges and universities currently integrate sustainability and social justice practices into their organizations?—Based on your experience or all you know and have heard, how well do colleges and universities currently provide opportunities to learn about and act on issues of sustainability and social justice?—How important do you think it is for colleges and universities to teach about issues of sustainability and social justice and teach how to take action on those issues? Showing important/very important.



U.S. Youth Wants and Expectations for Higher Education

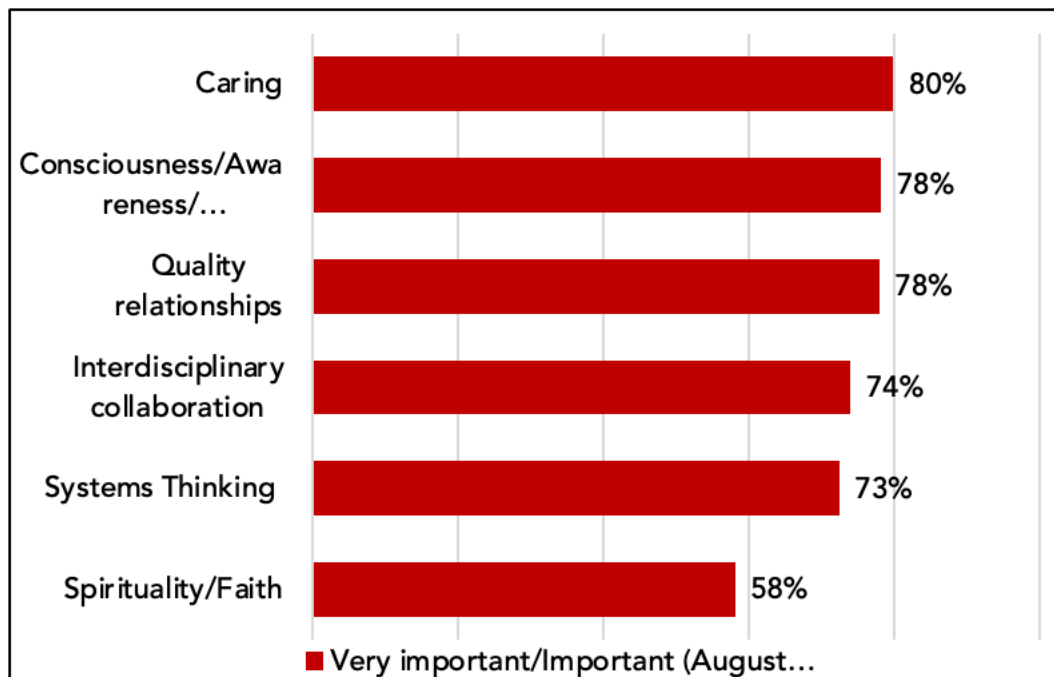
- **U.S. colleges and universities should teach *caring and consciousness*:** Around eight-in-ten U.S. youth report that colleges and universities teaching the capacities of “caring” and “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness” are important for solving problems of sustainability and social justice.
- Sustainability and social justice issues and action are important to teach: Nearly three-in-four U.S. youth rank colleges and universities teaching about issues of sustainability and social justice and how to take action as important.
- **Rating higher education on sustainability and social justice, room for improvement:** While about two-thirds of U.S. youth feel that colleges and universities are performing at least somewhat well in both providing opportunities to learn about sustainability and social justice (67%) and integrating sustainability and social justice practices into their organizations (65%), at least one-in-four indicate the opposite and only two-in-ten would give colleges and universities a “very well” rating in response to these questions.
- **Ranking educational and experiential activities for climate change education:** Experiential and engaged instructional activities receive high levels of support from U.S. youth as interesting activities for inclusion in course work on climate change.

Problem solving capacities for sustainability & social justice

U.S. youth rated “caring” (80%), “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness” (78%), and “quality relationships” (78%) as highly as important for solving problem-solving of sustainability and social justice issues.

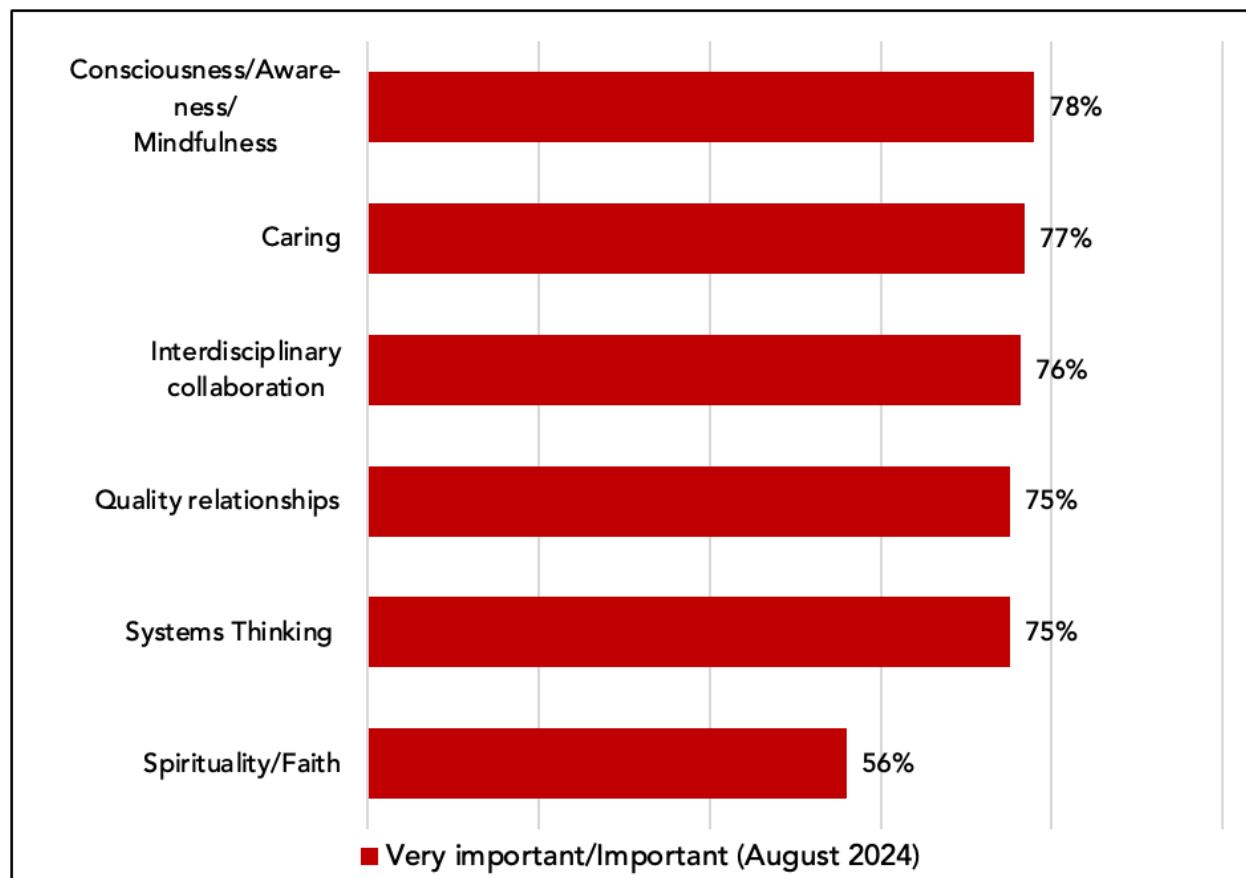
- While perceptions of importance across these problem-solving capacities were relatively consistent across age categories, 25-29-year-olds rated “spirituality/faith” to be more important (66%) compared to the average across all age groups (58%).

QUESTION: How important do you feel the following capacities are for solving problems of sustainability and social justice?



Large majorities of U.S. youth indicate that colleges and universities teaching inner capacities like “consciousness/awareness/mindfulness” (78.0%) and “caring” (77%) is important.

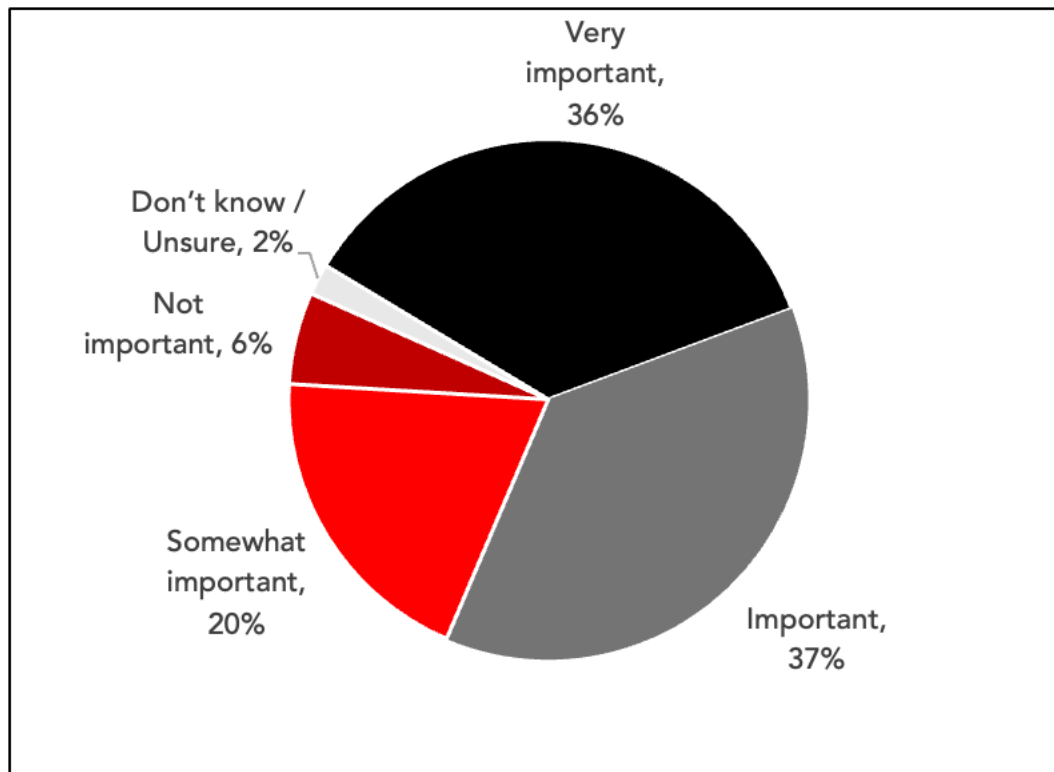
QUESTION: How important is it for colleges and universities to **teach** these capacities?



Role of higher education in relation to sustainability & social justice

Nearly three-quarters of U.S. youth (73%) think it's important for colleges and universities to teach about issues of sustainability and social justice and teach how to take action on these issues.

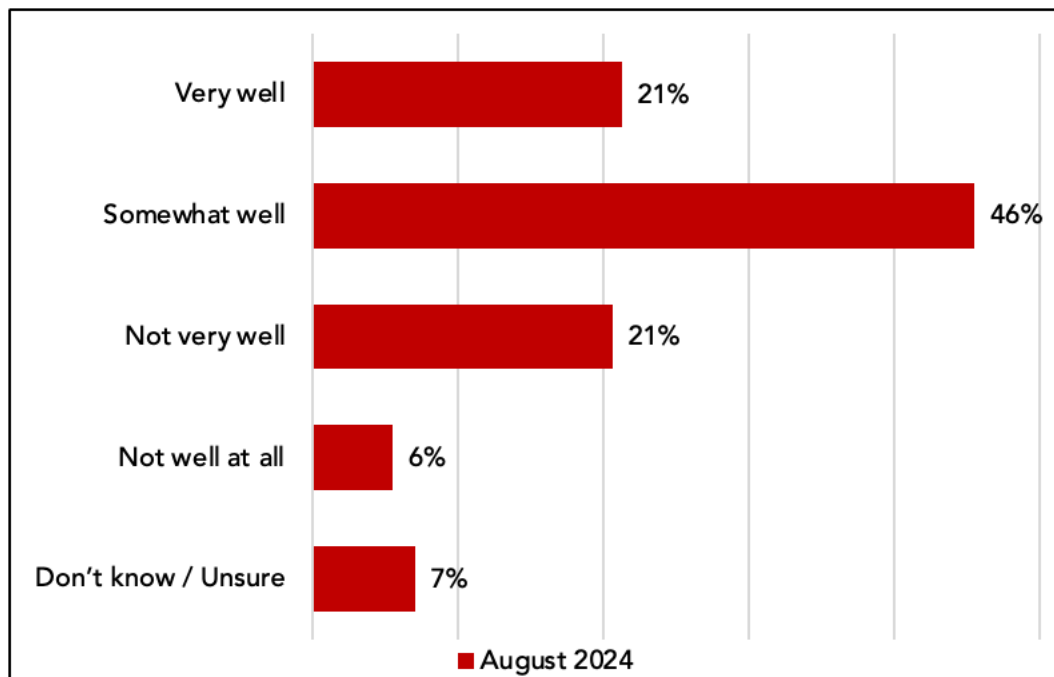
QUESTION: How important do you think it is for colleges and universities to **teach** about issues of sustainability and social justice and teach how to take action on those issues?



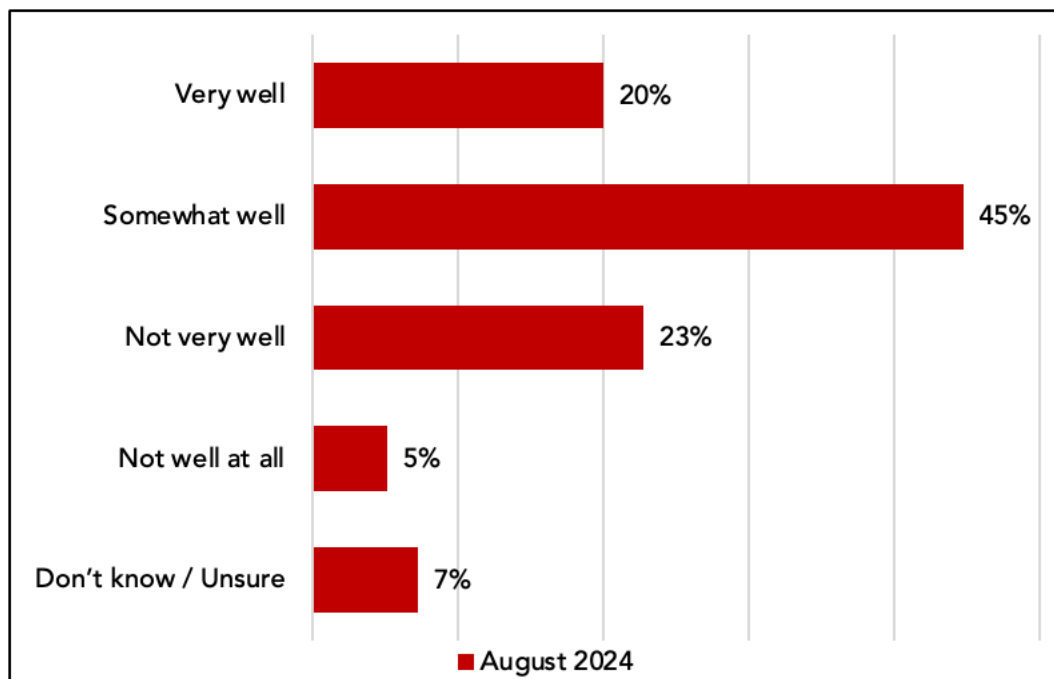
Rating higher education on sustainability & social justice

Room for improvement, while about two-thirds of U.S. youth feel that colleges and universities are performing at least *somewhat well* in both providing opportunities to learn about sustainability and social justice (67%) and integrating sustainability and social justice practices into their organizations (65%), at least one-in-four indicate the opposite and only two-in-ten would give colleges and universities a *very well* rating in response to these questions.

QUESTION: Based on your experience or all you know and have heard, how well do colleges and universities currently **provide opportunities** to learn about and act on issues of sustainability and social justice?

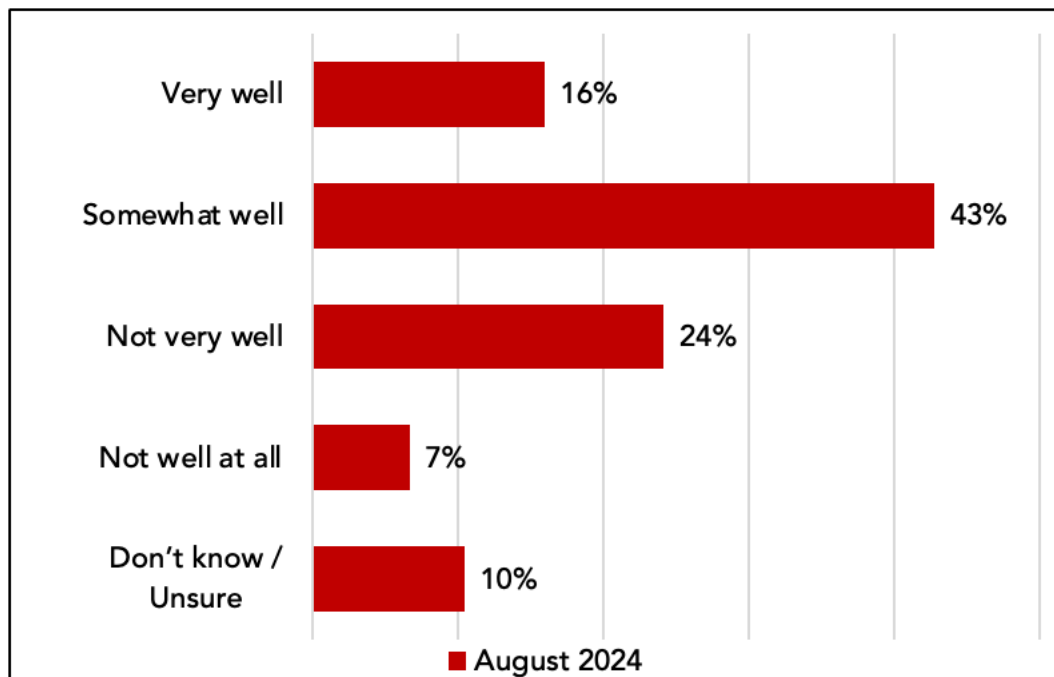


QUESTION: Based on your experience or all you know and have heard, how well do colleges and universities currently **integrate** sustainability and social justice practices **into their organizations**?



U.S. youth are mixed on how well colleges and universities are preparing students to handle challenges of climate change with 59% say they are performing at least *somewhat* well compared to 31% saying they are not doing *well* in these areas. The most frequently mentioned opportunities that higher education should offer in these areas are to: *provide education and awareness programs on climate change* (48%) and to: *support research and innovation in sustainable products and technologies* (45%).

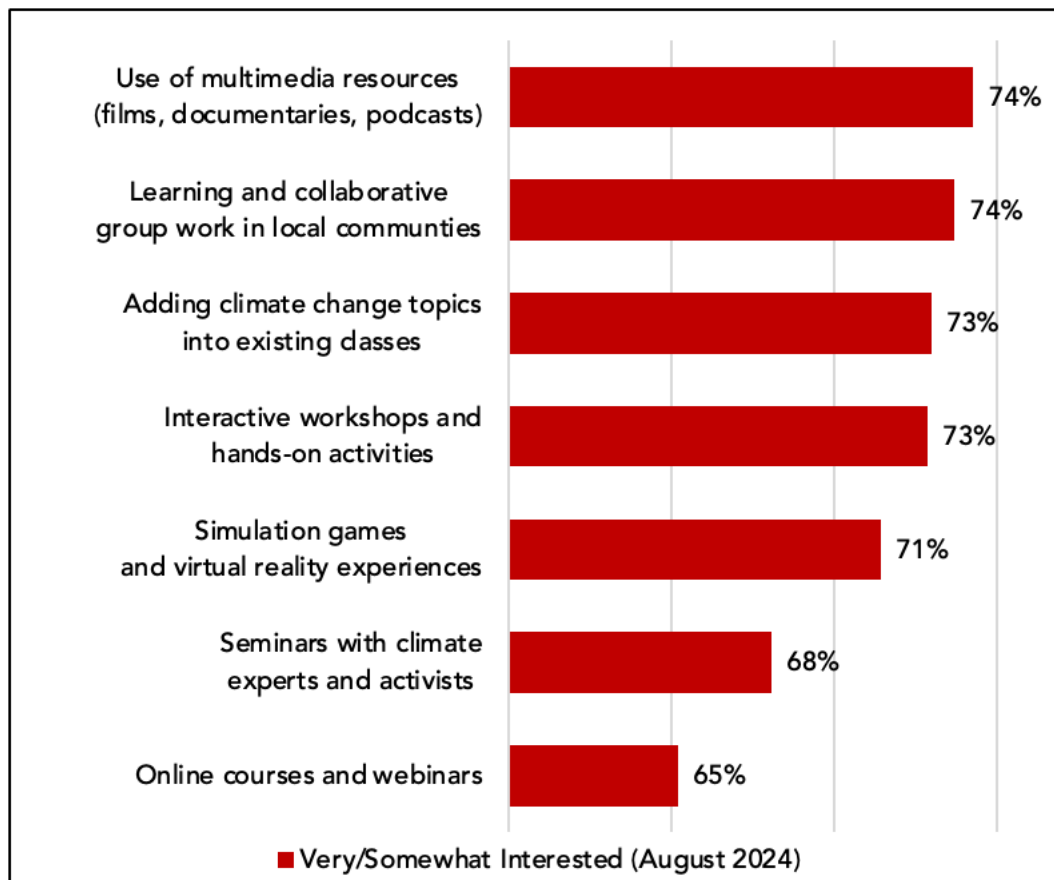
QUESTION: Based on your experience or all you know and have heard, how well are colleges and universities **preparing students** to handle challenges of **climate change arising in their personal and professional lives?**



Ranking educational and experiential activities for climate change education

Experiential and engaged instructional activities receive high levels of support from U.S. youth as interesting activities for inclusion in course work on climate change.

QUESTION: How interested would you be in the following activities if they were included in classes to help prepare students to handle challenges of climate change arising in their personal and professional lives?



Opportunities for Higher Education to Close Disconnects: Responsibility vs Action

- **High responsibility, low confidence:** While most U.S. youth believe they have an individual responsibility to address climate change, nearly six-in-ten supported statements that individual actions will have limited or no effect.
- **Individual actions taken collectively seen as ineffective:** Less than two-in-ten U.S. youth took the position that collective individual actions would lead to significant improvements in tackling climate change.
- **U.S. youth's confidence to take effective action high:** In contrast to the low rating on effectiveness of individual action, approximately seven-in-ten U.S. youth believe they have the ability to take effective action on issues of sustainability, social justice and climate change.
- **Over 50% of U.S. youth consider sustainability and social justice as relevant to their lives:** Slightly more than one-in-two U.S. youth consider sustainability and social justice issues as relevant to their future employment and personal lives.
- **Drivers and barriers to action:** U.S. youth are motivated by a mix of personal values and future-oriented concepts to act on issues of sustainability and social justice. The barriers that

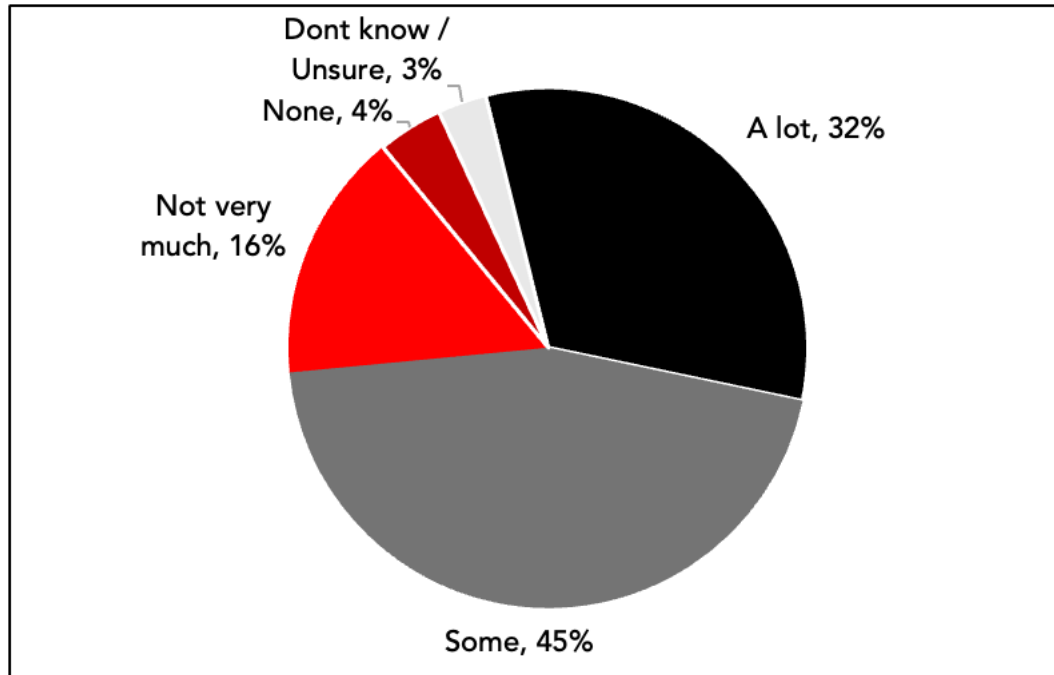
were highest rated were “financial resources” (39%), “lack of knowledge” (35%) and “ineffectiveness of individual action” (33%).

- **Willingness to take specific actions low:** No provided actions to address sustainability and social justice received majority support from U.S. youth. The highest-ranking actions where nearly four-in-ten indicated willingness were: “cut consumption and waste,” “reduce carbon footprint/environmental impact” and “vote for candidates who support my position on these issues.”
- **Opportunities for recruitment:** Nearly three-in-five U.S. youth say that they either currently are or would have been “more likely” to apply to a college or university that offered a program focused on sustainability and social justice.
- **Roles for higher education:** U.S. youth indicate a wide range of roles that they want colleges and universities to play in preparing their students for the challenges of climate change—providing opportunities for education and awareness, research and innovation, and community engagement/climate action were rated highest.
- **Colleges and universities can benefit local communities:** Nearly nine-in-ten U.S. youth indicate a beneficial role for universities engaging with their local communities to address issues of sustainability and social justice.
- **Preference for government action:** Respondents place primary responsibility for addressing these issues on federal and state governments, with less emphasis on educational institutions or religious organizations.

Responsibility for acting on climate change

Over three-quarters of U.S. youth say individuals should take *some* or *a lot* of responsibility in addressing climate change (77%).

QUESTION: How much responsibility should individuals take for addressing **climate change**?

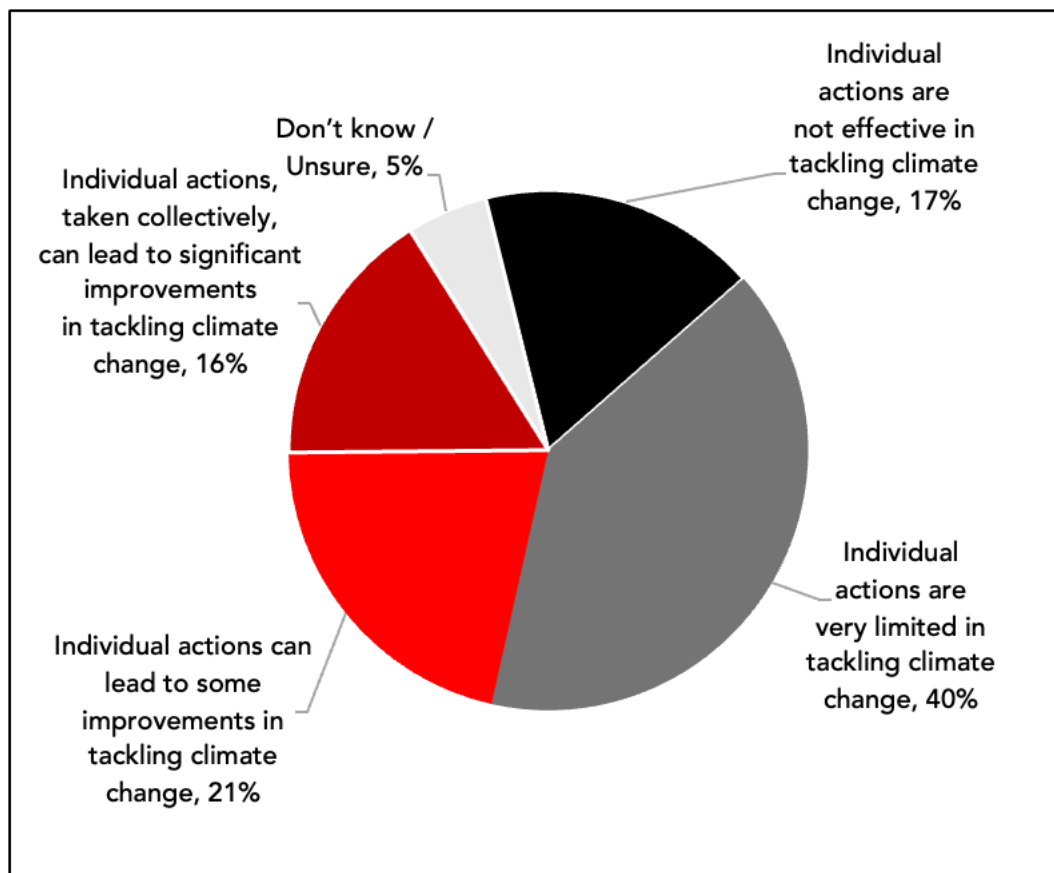


Effectiveness of individual action on climate change

There are large percentage-point gaps in respondents rating of the effectiveness of individual actions in addressing climate change. While 21% of U.S. youth believe individual actions can lead to at least *some* improvements in tackling climate change, 57% believe these actions will have *very limited* or *not effective* on addressing climate issues. Only 16% indicate agreement with the position that *individual actions taken collectively can lead to significant improvements in tackling climate change*.

- This sentiment fluctuated slightly across age categories as 53% of 15-17-year-olds believe individual actions will have “very limited” or “no effect” compared to 58% of 18-21-year-olds, 62% of 22-24-year-olds, and 53% of 25-29-year-olds.
- Female respondents were more optimistic in their views towards individual actions as 42% feel that individual actions can lead to at least “some improvements” in tackling climate change, compared to 32% of males.

QUESTION: Which position most closely reflects your view on the effectiveness of individual actions in tackling climate change? Please select the position that best represents your opinion.

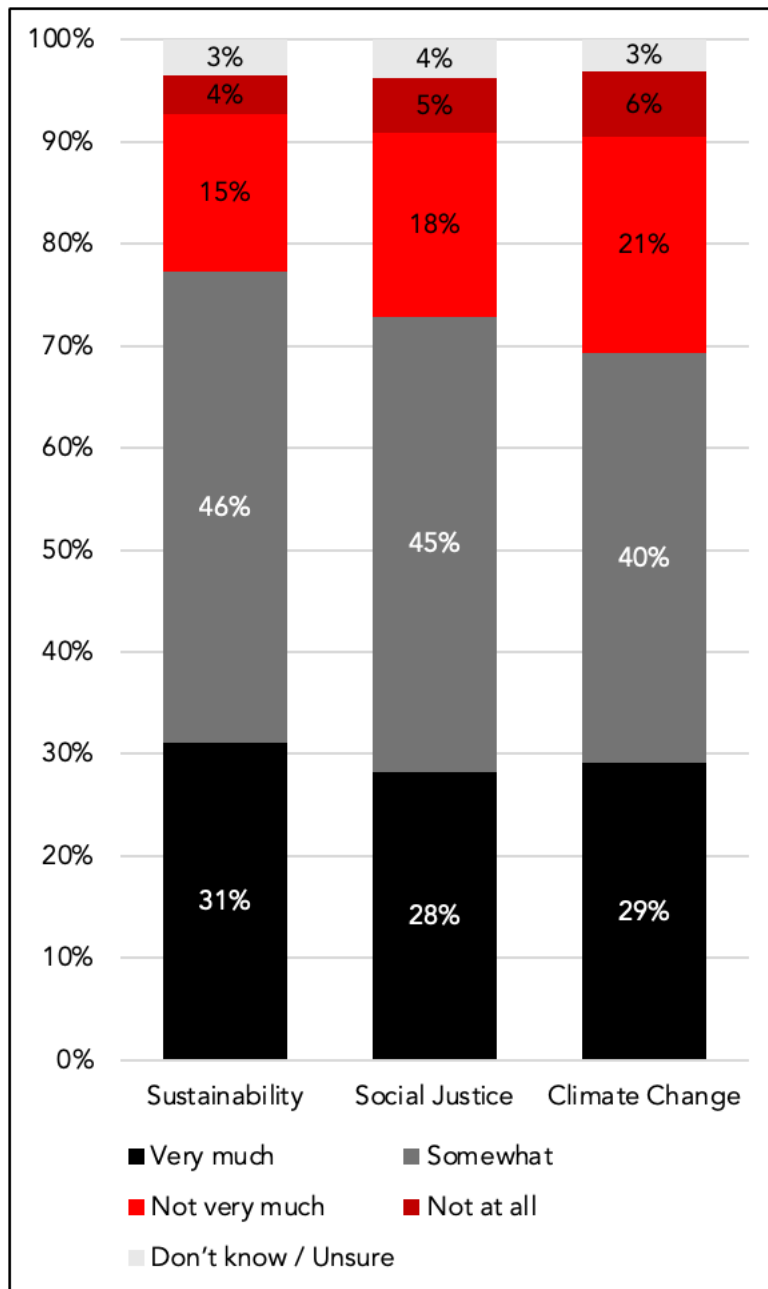


Acting on sustainability, social justice & climate change

More U.S. youth believe they have the ability to effectively tackle sustainability (77%) issues rather than issues related to climate change (70%). Over one-in-four U.S. youth do not believe they have the ability to take effective action on climate change (28%).

- U.S. youth 15-17 years old were less likely to feel they can take effective action on sustainability (71%) compared to 18-21-year-olds (76%), 22-24-year-olds (79%) and 25-29-year-olds (81%).
- This was a similar trend when looking at taking effective action on social justice where 66% of 15-17-year-olds felt they could take at least “somewhat” effective action, this trended upward among 18-21-year-olds (71%), 22-24-year-olds (72%) and 25-29-year-olds (81%).

QUESTION: To what degree do you think you have the ability to take effective action on issues related to the following: sustainability, social justice, climate change? (August 2024)

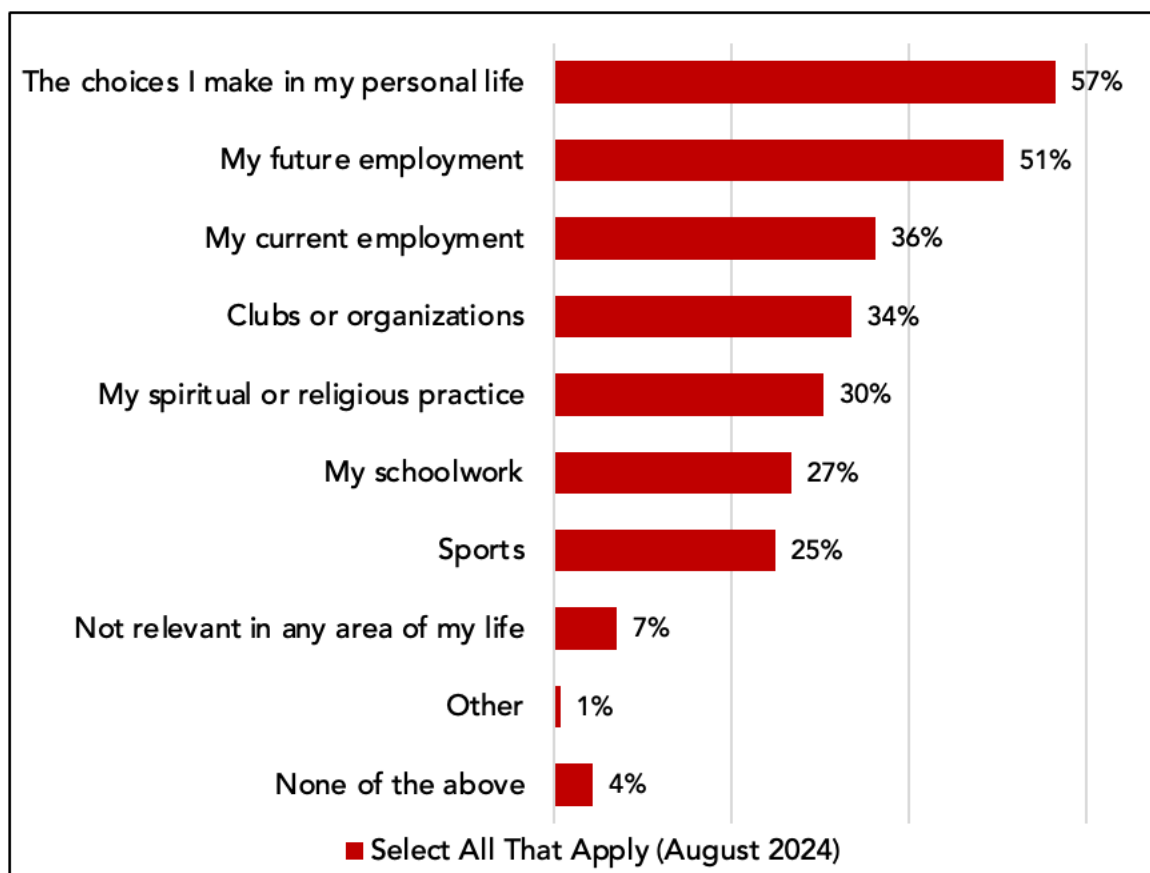


Relevance of sustainability & social justice

Currently, a slight majority of U.S. youth acknowledge that sustainability and social justice are *relevant to the choices they make in their personal lives* (57%), and about half expect these concepts to be a part of their *future employment* (51%). Less than one-in-ten say sustainability and social justice have no relevance on any area of their life at the time of this survey (7%).

- Focusing on different school age respondents, 44% of 15-17-year-olds say social justice and sustainability are relevant to their *schoolwork* compared to 31% of 18-21-year-olds.
- Forty-six percent of 25-29-year-olds say these concepts are relevant to their *current employment*, higher than other age categories.

QUESTION: Choose the **area(s) of your life** where you feel that sustainability and social justice are relevant. Please select all that apply.



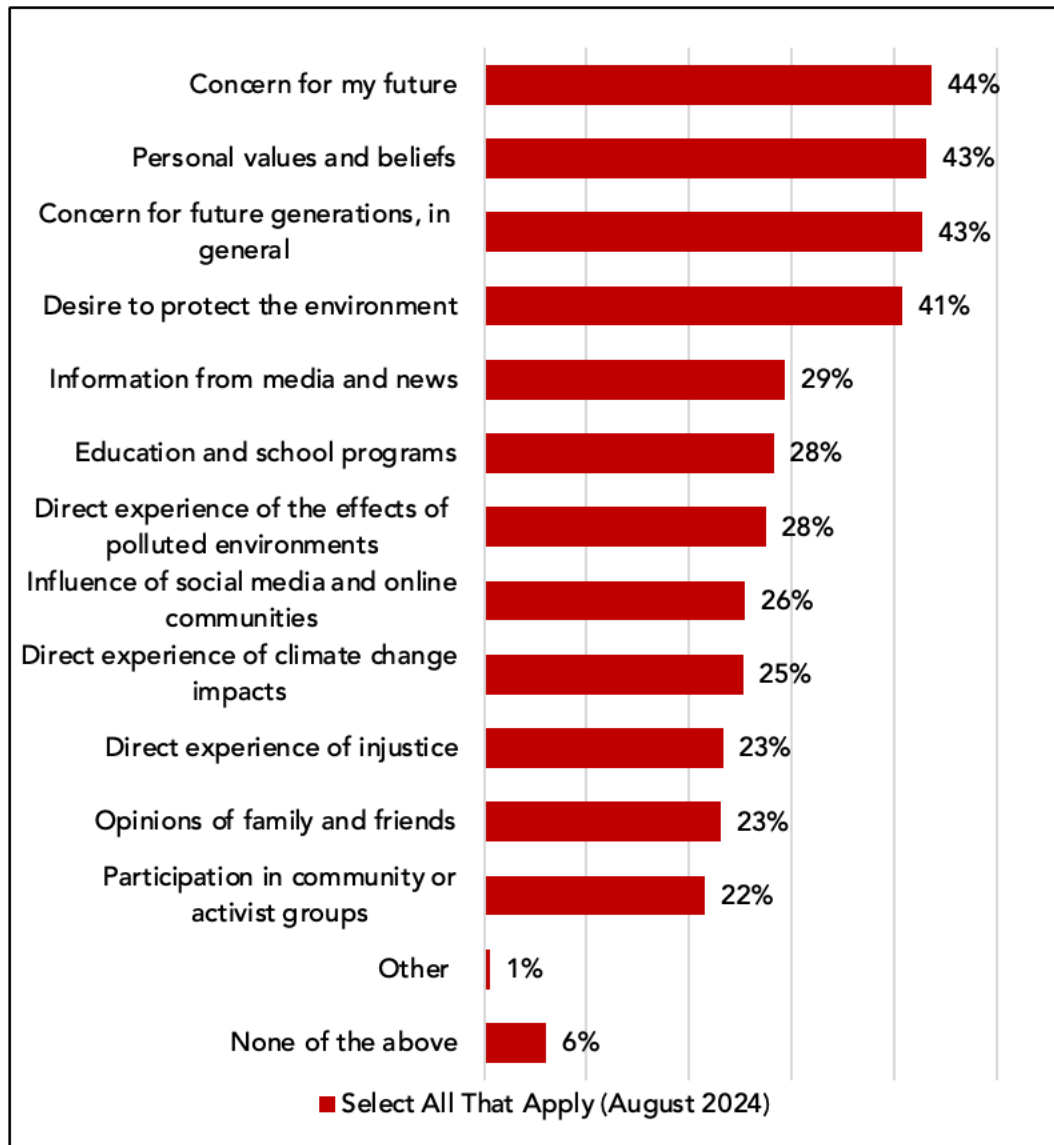
Motivations and barriers

U.S. youth are generally motivated to act based on *concern for their future* (44%), *personal values and beliefs* (43%) and *concerns for future generations* (43%).

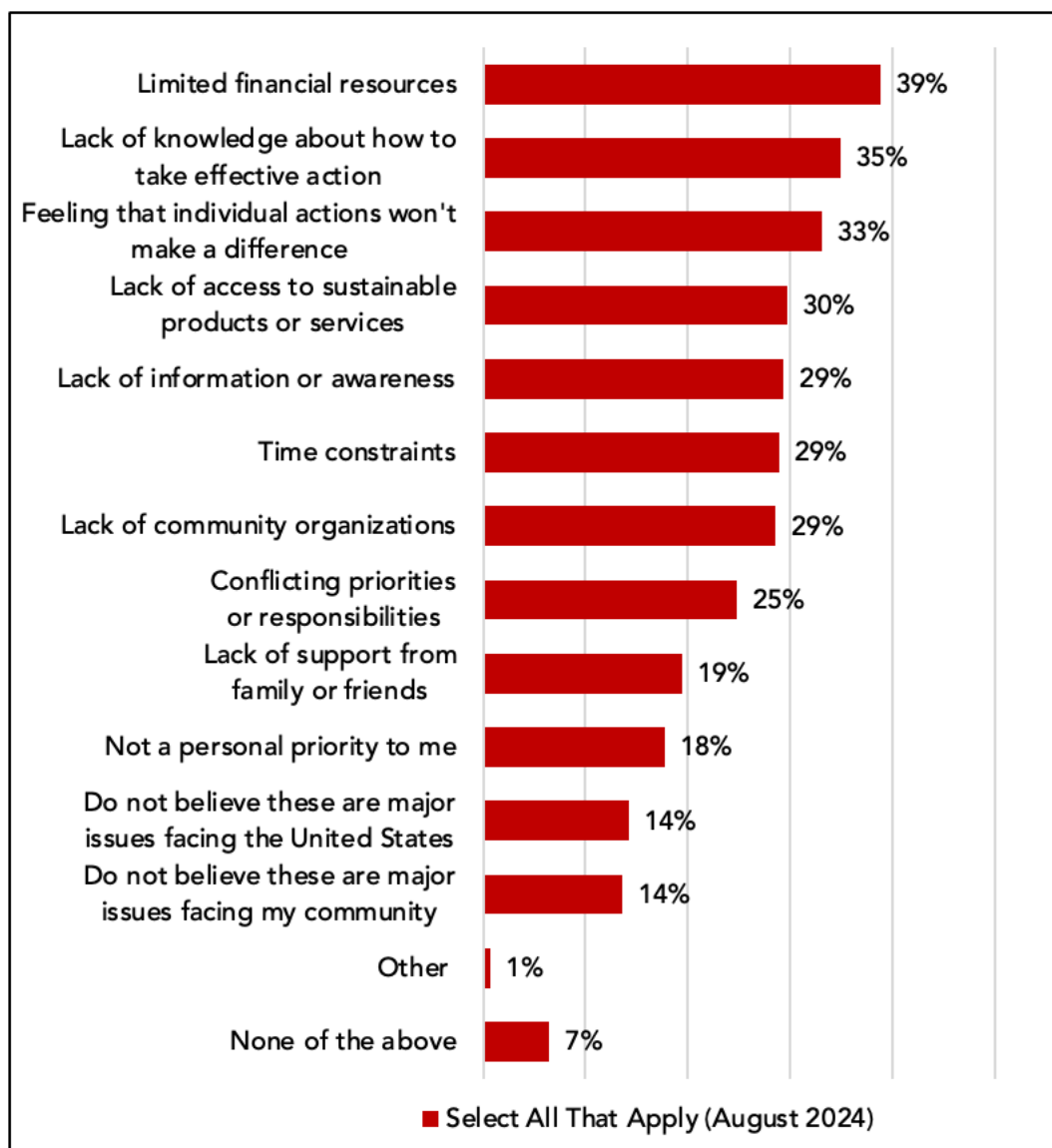
Over one-third indicate that *financial resources* (39%) or *knowledge to take effective action* (35%) are barriers to action. Another one-in-three U.S. youth feel their individual actions will not

make a difference in addressing these issues of climate change sustainability and social justice (33%).

QUESTION: What **motivates** you to act on the issues related to climate change, sustainability and social justice? Please select all that apply.



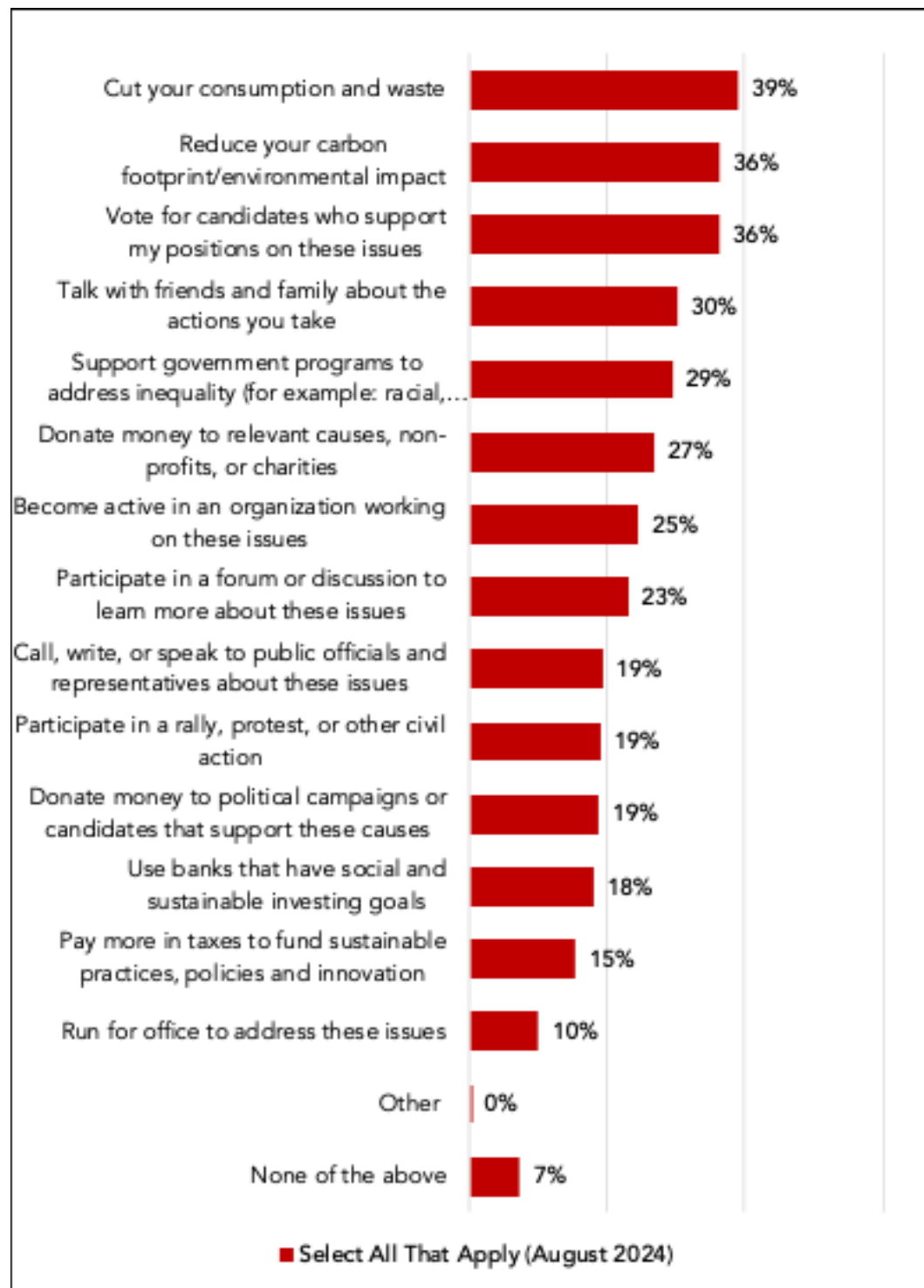
QUESTION: What **barriers** exist that make it difficult for you to act on issues related to climate change, sustainability and social justice? Please select all that apply.



Action on sustainability, social justice & climate change

When asked what actions they would be willing to take to help address climate change, sustainability, and/or social justice issues in the next six months, none of the actions proposed received majority support. U.S. youth were more likely to indicate taking personal steps such as *cutting consumption and waste* (39%) and *reducing their carbon footprint* (36%). They were less likely to indicate taking steps actions such as *supporting government programs to address inequality* (29%) and *using banks that have social and sustainable investing goals* (18%).

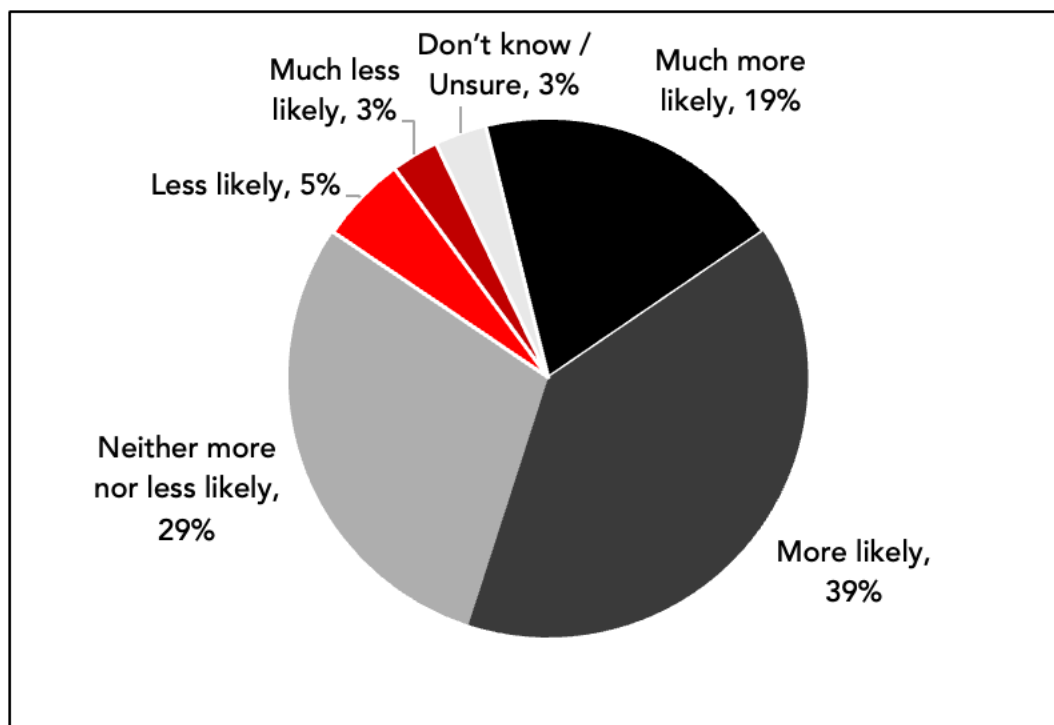
QUESTION: Finally, which, if any, of the following **actions or steps** would you be willing to take in your personal life to help address climate change, sustainability and/or social justice issues in the next six months? Please select all that apply.



Higher education sustainability & social justice program interest

Nearly three-in-five U.S. youth say that they either currently are or would have been *more likely* to apply to a college or university that offered a program focused on *sustainability* and *social justice* (59%). In addition, over four-fifths feel that higher education can have a “beneficial” role in addressing *sustainability* (85%) and *social justice* (84%) issues in their community.

QUESTION(S): 1) If a college or university offered a program focused on sustainability and social justice, would you be more or less likely to consider applying for admittance to that college or university? (N=1,092, respondents with some high school, no diploma; High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED); trade/technical/vocational training) or 2) If you were applying for admittance to a college or university **now**, would you be more or less likely to consider applying if it offered a program focused on sustainability and social justice? (N=908, respondents with some college credit, no degree; associate degree; bachelor’s degree; master’s degree; doctoral degree)



Role of higher education

U.S. youth indicate a wide range of roles that they want colleges and universities to play in preparing students for the challenges of climate change—providing opportunities for education and awareness, research and innovation, and community engagement/climate action were rated highest.

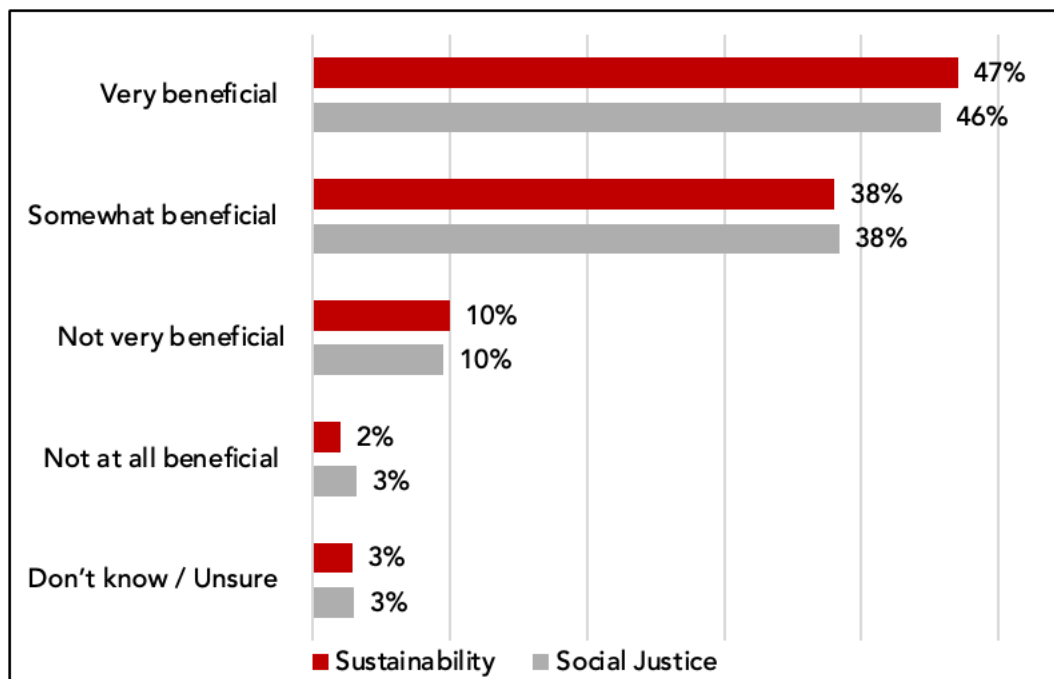
QUESTION: What role should colleges and universities play in preparing students to handle challenges of climate change arising in their personal and professional lives? Please select all that apply.

College and University Role...	Select All That Apply (August 2024)
Provide education and awareness programs on climate change	48%
Support research and innovation in sustainable products and technologies	45%
Encourage community engagement and participation in climate action	44%
Advocate for and implement policies and practices to reduce the effects of climate change	40%
Foster a culture of sustainability and responsibility	39%
Offer funding and resources for climate-change related projects and initiatives	39%
Create partnerships with climate organizations and experts	38%
Develop mentorship and career opportunities in green industries	37%
Other	1%
None of the above	7%

Colleges and universities can benefit local communities

Nearly nine-in-ten U.S. youth indicate a beneficial role in universities engaging with their local communities.

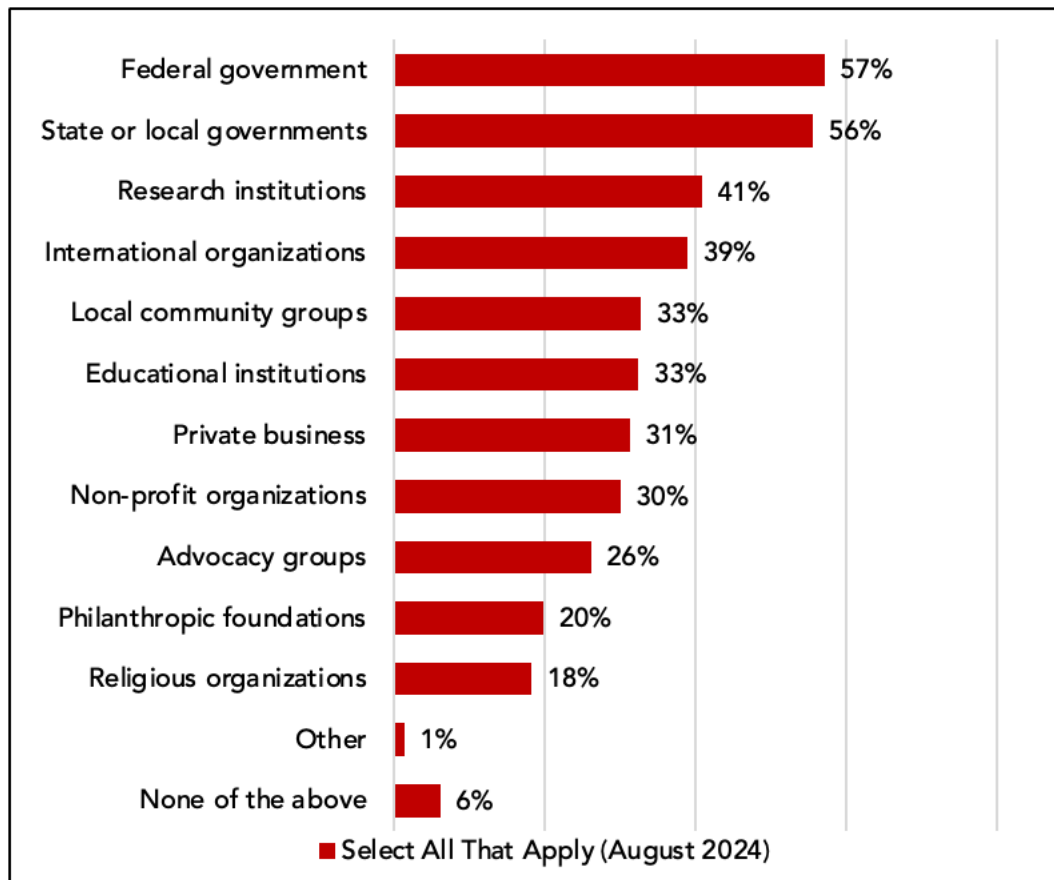
QUESTION: Now, please think specifically about the role that colleges and universities play in **sustainability** and **social justice** issues **facing their local communities**. How beneficial, if at all, do you believe it would be if colleges and universities engaged with local communities in collaborative action to address these issues?



Government should take responsibility for addressing climate change

Beyond a high sense of individual responsibility, slight majorities of U.S. youth are of the opinion that it is the role of *federal* (57%) or *state or local governments* (55%) to take on the responsibility of addressing climate change.

QUESTION: Which, if any, of the following **institutions and organizations** should take responsibility for addressing **climate change**? Please select all that apply.



Understanding of Social Justice & Sustainability Among U.S. Youth

- **Intersectionality in youth perspectives:** Over nine-in-ten U.S. youth agree that sustainability and social justice are at least somewhat intertwined. Greater than seven-in-ten also report that they are aware of the connections between sustainability, social justice and climate change.
- **Expanding the definition of sustainability:** Without a provided definition, U.S. youth primarily associated sustainability with environmental concepts like “affordable and clean energy” and “clean water and sanitation.” However, when provided with a holistic and inclusive definition of sustainability, they shifted to include issues associated with justice and equality like: “reduced inequalities,” “decent work and economic growth” and “no poverty.”

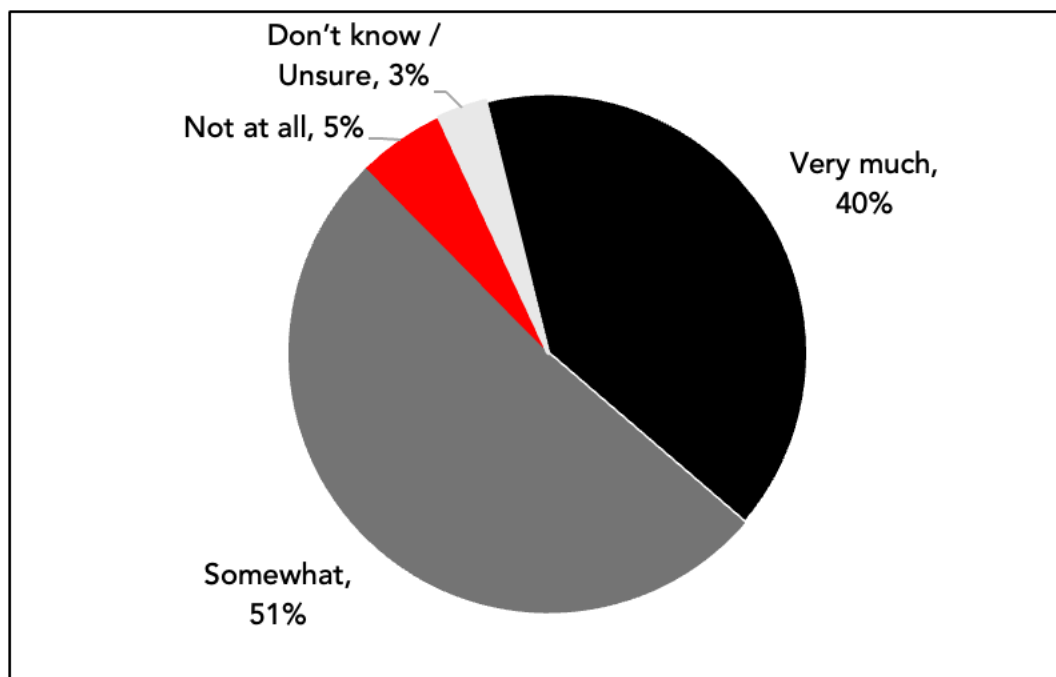
- **Sustainability and social justice awareness and importance:** The vast majority of U.S. youth indicated familiarity with sustainability and social justice as concepts and that sustainability and social justice were “important.” Familiarity with international sustainability and social justice frameworks and calls to action were generally low.
- **Community consensus on sustainability, social justice and climate change:** Most youth believe there is a consensus between their own views and those of their friends, family and community on issues related to sustainability, social justice and climate change.

Intersection of sustainability, social justice & climate change

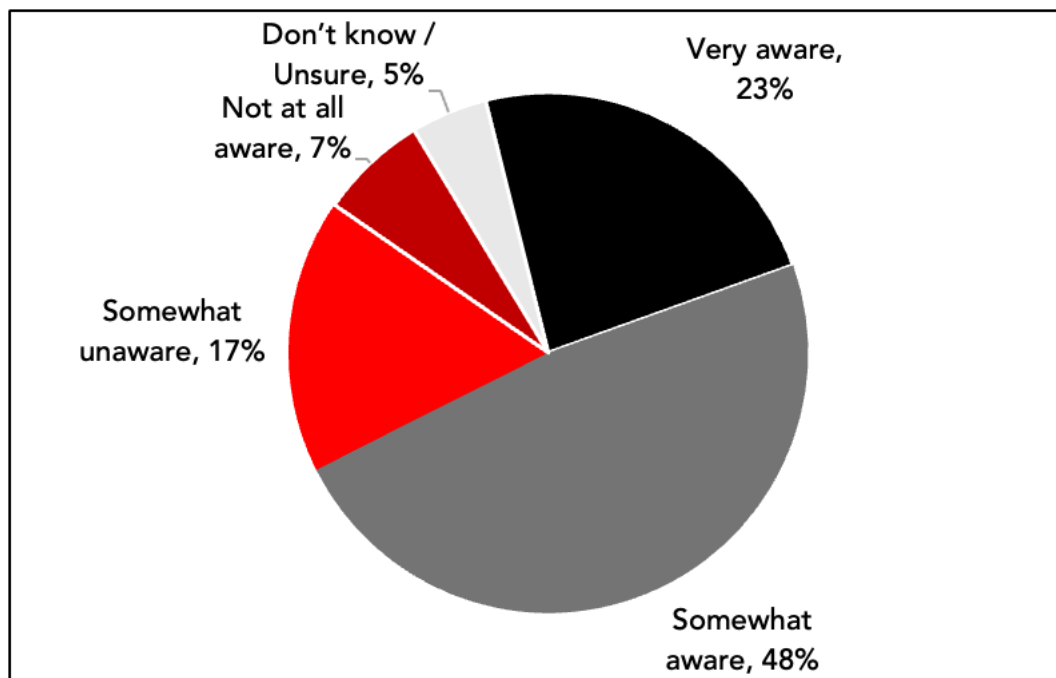
Over nine-in-ten U.S. youth (92%) agree that the ideas of sustainability and social justice are at least *somewhat* intertwined, with (71%) saying they are aware of the connections between sustainability, social justice and climate change. A similar percentage of respondents also report these connections are believable (74%).

- Perceptions that social justice and sustainability are intertwined was closely tied to age as 25-29-year-olds were the most likely to believe they were *very much* connected (48%). This trended downward among 22-24-year-olds (41%), 18-21-year-olds (38%) and 15-17-year-olds (32%).
- There was far greater parity across the age categories in their awareness of the connection between climate change, sustainability and social justice.

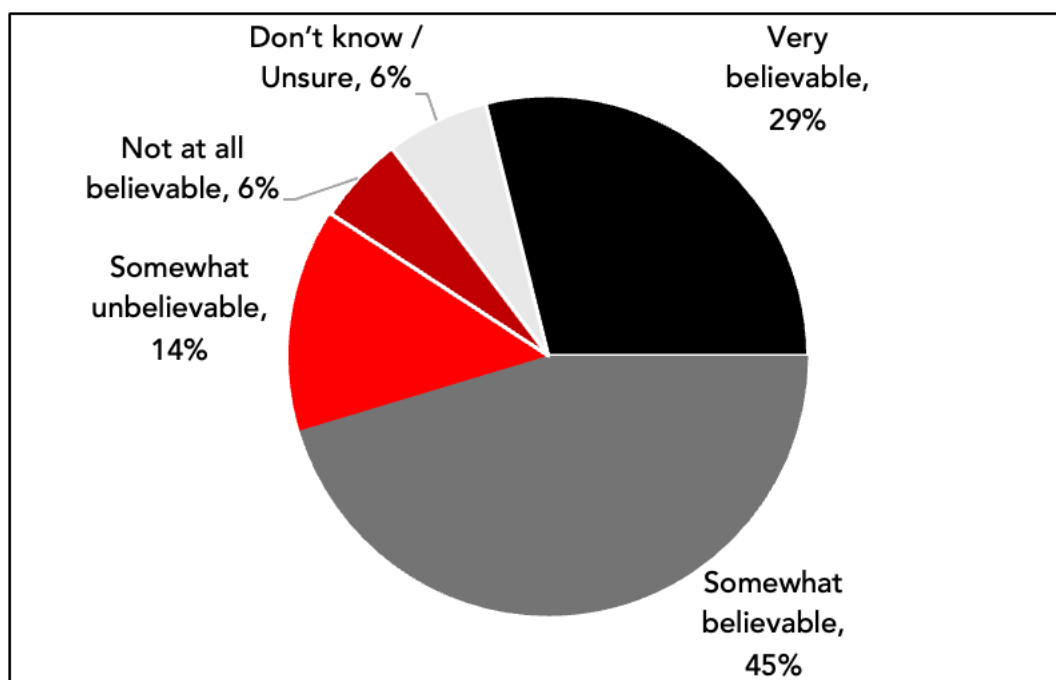
QUESTION: To what degree do you think **sustainability** and **social justice** are intertwined?



QUESTION: How **aware** are you of the connections between climate change, sustainability and social justice?



QUESTION: How **believable** are the reported connections between climate change, sustainability and social justice?



Definitions of sustainability & social justice

The definitions of sustainability and social justice provided to survey participants were:

- One definition of “sustainability” is: The balanced and integrated pursuit of social progress, economic development and environmental protection to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encompasses efforts to end poverty, protect the planet, ensure prosperity for all, reduce inequalities and foster peaceful and inclusive societies through collaborative global action.
- One definition of “social justice” is: Social justice is about fairness and equality in society. It means making sure everyone has the same rights and opportunities, regardless of their background, race, gender or wealth. Social justice aims to eliminate discrimination and ensure that everyone can participate fully in society, have access to resources and be treated with respect and dignity.

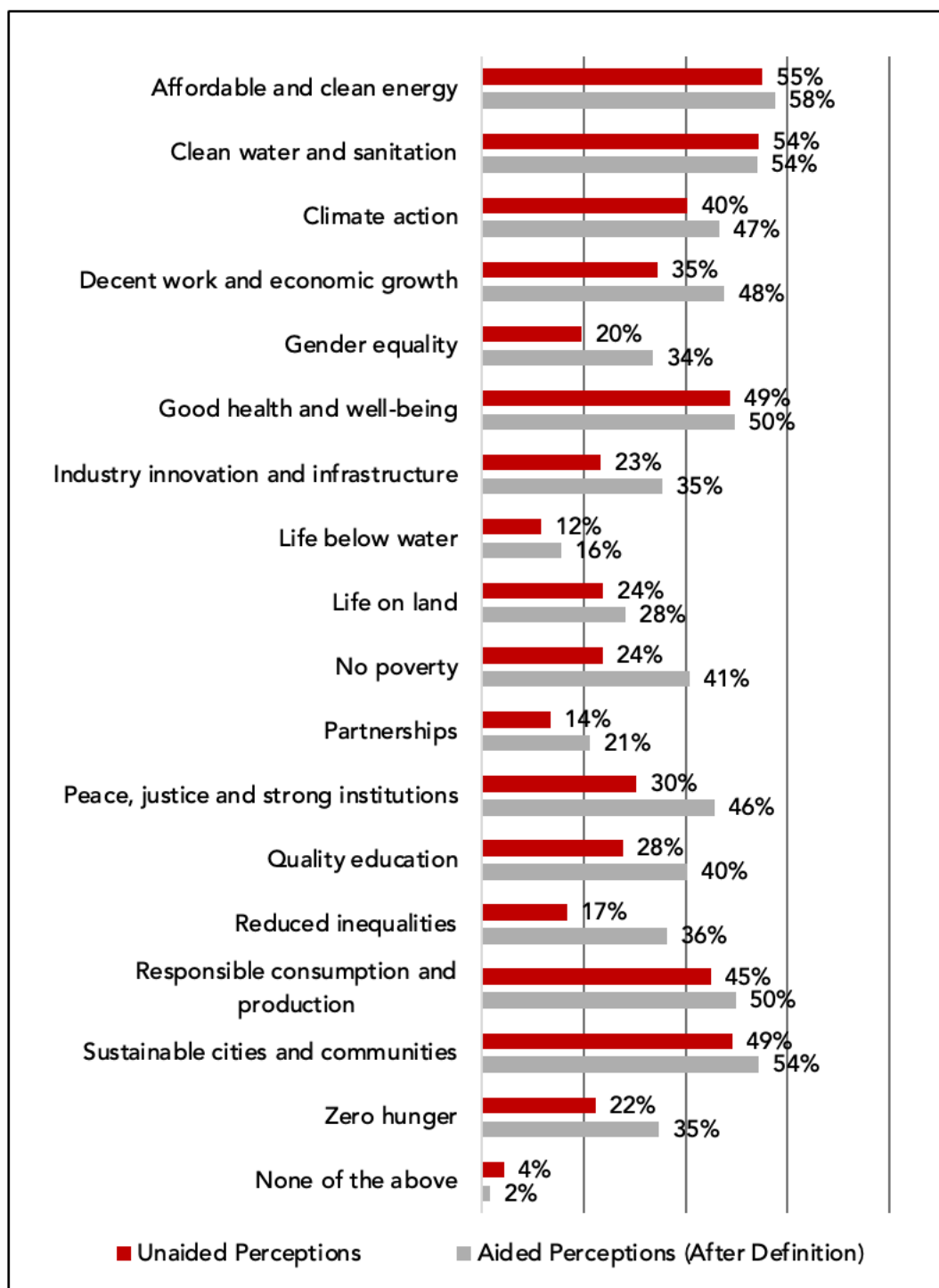
Expanding U.S. youth’s definition of sustainability

Before the working definition of “sustainability” above was provided, U.S. youth were asked to select issues they would include in their definition of sustainability. Prior to providing the definition, environmental areas dominated their choices with slight majorities of U.S. youth associating *affordable and clean energy* (55%) and *clean water and sanitation* (54%) with their current definitions of sustainability.

After the definition was provided, their interpretation of the concept of sustainability broadened considerably to include concepts related to justice and equality. More U.S. youth perceived that concepts such as *reduced inequalities* (+19 percentage points), *no poverty* (+17 percentage points) and *peace, justice, and strong institutions* (+16 percentage points) were linked to their current definitions of sustainability.

- After being prompted with the definition of sustainability, 15-17-year-olds were more likely to associate *decent work and economic growth* (58%) and *peace, justice and strong institutions* (57%) with the concept than the other age groups.

QUESTION(S): 1) Which, if any, of the following concepts or ideas would you include in your current definition of the term **sustainability**? Please select all that apply; 2). After considering the definition above, which of the following concepts or ideas would you include in your definition of the term **sustainability**? Please select all that apply.

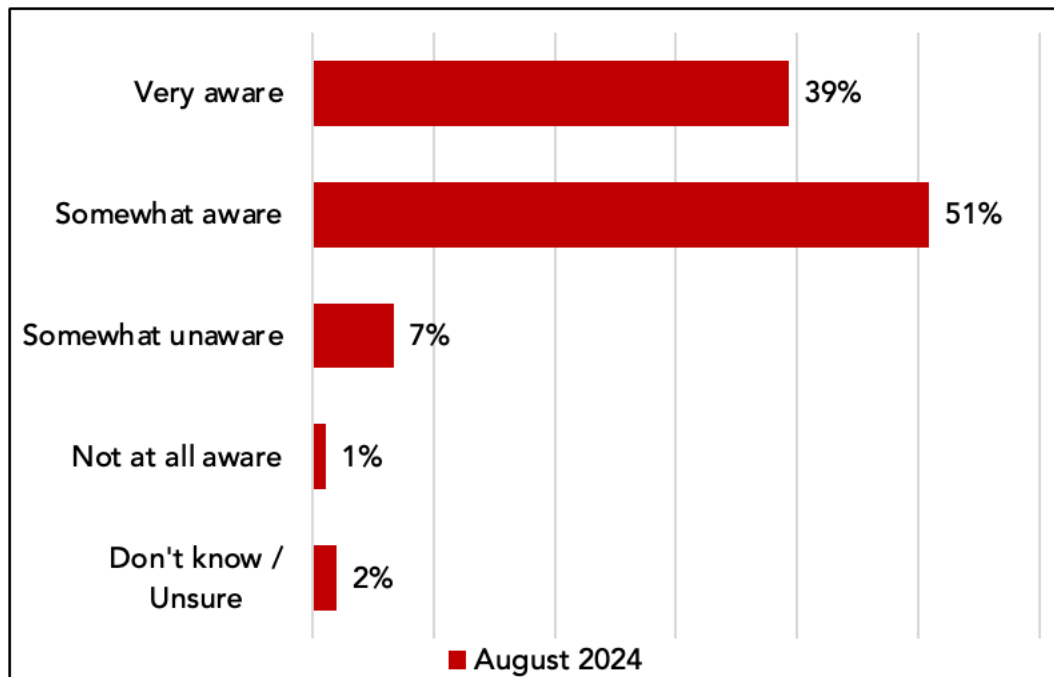


Awareness of sustainability & social justice

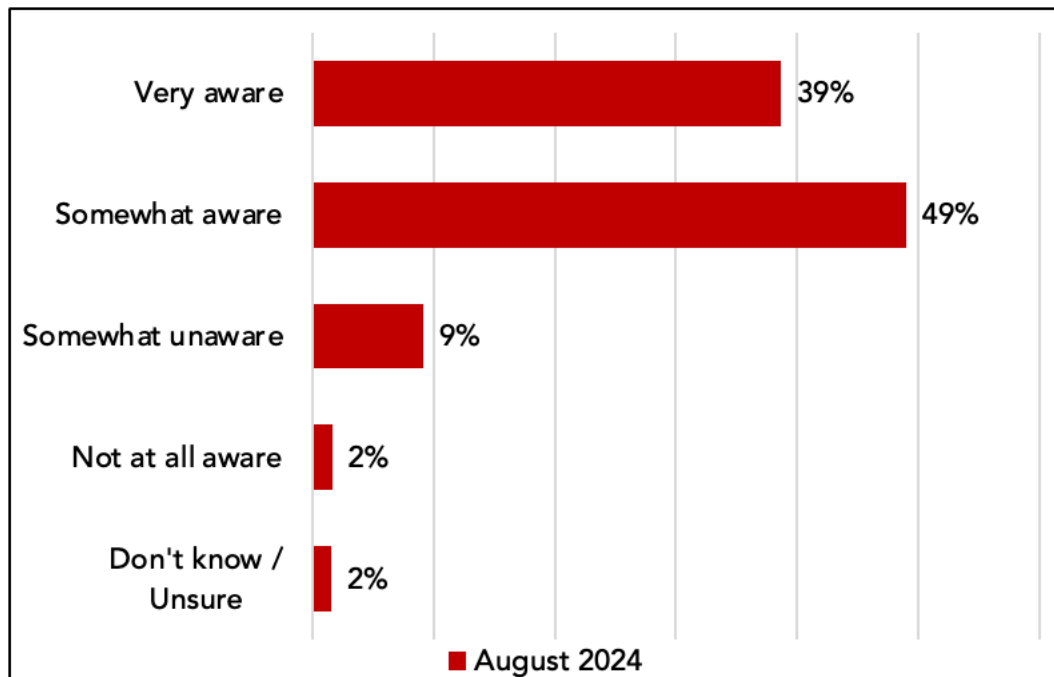
Nine-in-ten U.S. youth reported that they were “aware” of the term sustainability (90%) and nearly nine-in-ten were also “aware” of the term social justice (87%). These questions were asked prior to providing the term definitions referenced above.

- While overall awareness was relatively consistent across age groups, 15-17-year-olds were less likely to be “very aware” of the term sustainability compared to 25-29-year-olds (28% vs. 47%, “very aware”).
- There was a similar trend when looking at the term social justice, while 29% of 15-17-year-olds were “very aware” of the term, this trended upward among 18-21-year-olds (37%), 22-24-year-olds (38%), and 25-29-year-olds (50%).

QUESTION: How would you rate your **level of awareness** for the term **sustainability**?



QUESTION: How would you rate your **level of awareness** for the term **social justice**?

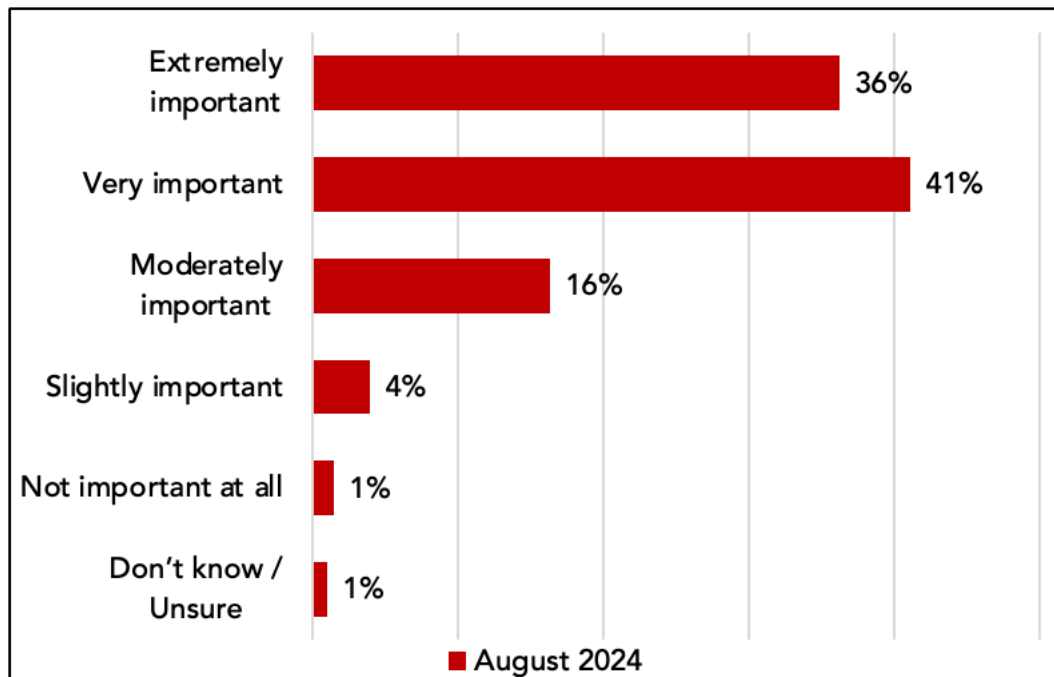


Importance of sustainability & social justice

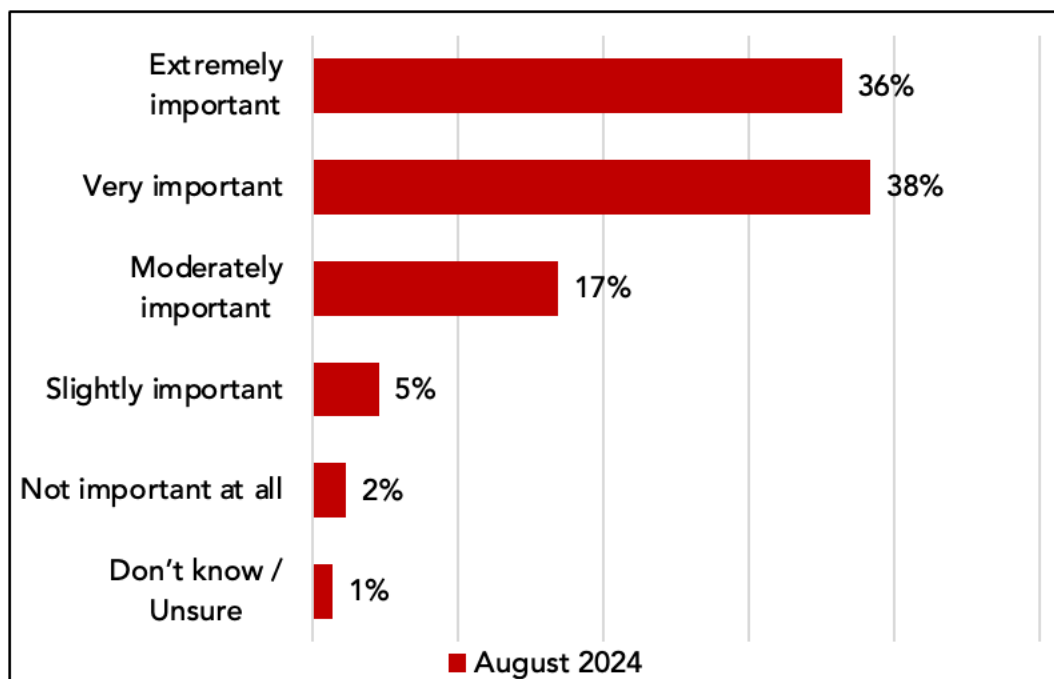
Three-quarters of U.S. youth indicated that the concepts of sustainability (77%) and social justice (75%) were *extremely* or *very* important to them. Further, there was near unanimous agreement that both these concepts were at least moderately important to 15-29-year-olds at the time of this survey.

- The importance rating of sustainability tends to trend upward by age as 72% of 15-17-year-olds think sustainability is “*extremely*” or “*very important*” compared to 76% of 18-21-year-olds, 77% of 22-24-year-olds and 82% of 25-29-year-olds.
- There was more consensus around the importance of social justice across the age categories.

QUESTION: Now, based on your most recent definition of sustainability, how **important** would you say **sustainability** is to you. (Question asked after definition above was provided).



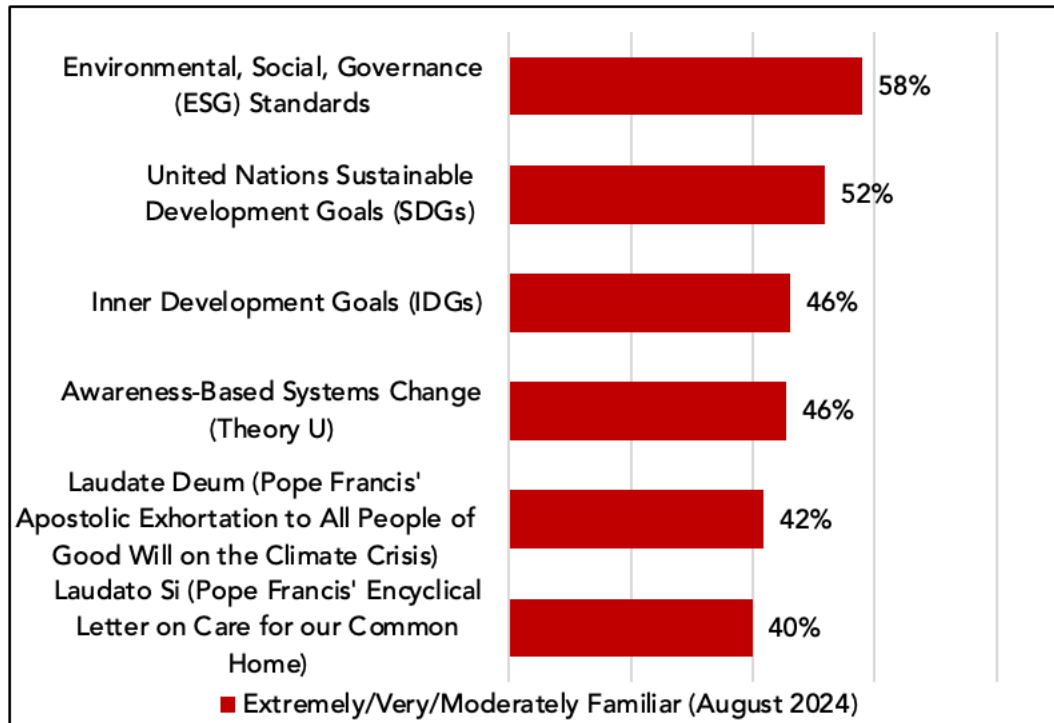
QUESTION: Now, based on the definition above, how **important** would you say **social justice** is to you?



Slight majorities of U.S. youth report more familiarity with *Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) Standards* (58% at least *moderately familiar*) and the *United Nations Sustainable*

Development Goals (SDGs) (52% at least moderately familiar) than other international frameworks for organizing action on sustainability and social justice.

QUESTION: How **familiar** are you with the following frameworks for organizing action on issues of sustainability and social justice?

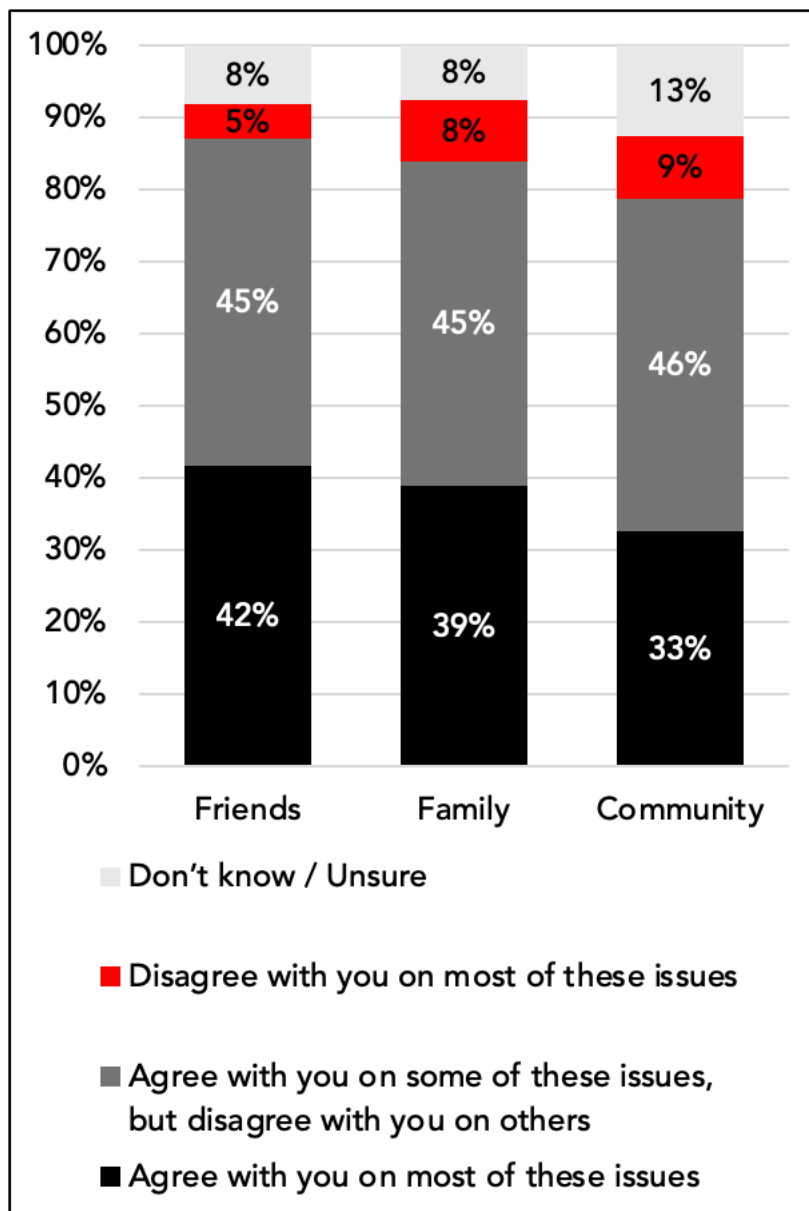


Consensus on sustainability, social justice & climate change opinions

Most youths believe there is a consensus between their own views and those of their friends, family and community on issues related to sustainability, social justice and climate change. U.S. youths indicate being slightly more aligned with the views of their friends compared to their family and their local community, however fewer than one-in-ten say they tend to disagree with any others in their life on most of these issues.

- Having views that are “mostly” aligned with their local community was higher among respondents ages 22-24 (35%) and 25-29 (38%) compared to respondents 15-17 (30%) and 18-21 (27%).

QUESTION: How similar do you feel your opinions are to the opinions of most of your **friends/family/local community** about issues of sustainability, social justice and climate change?



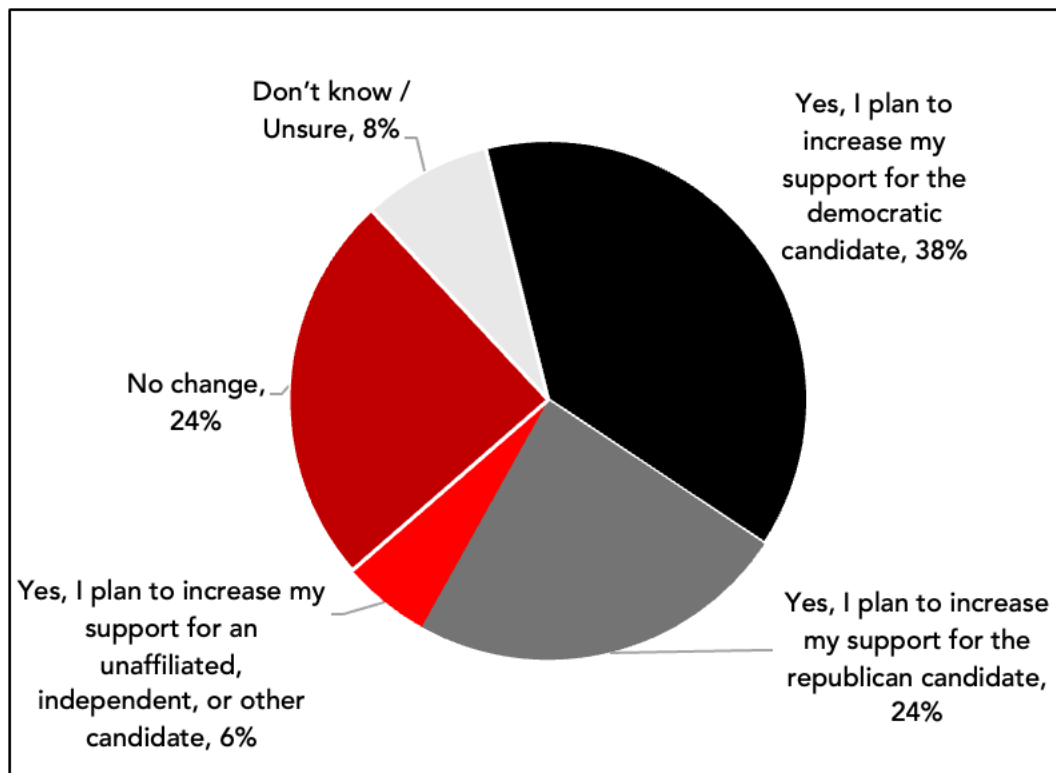
U.S. Youth Voting

- **Biden's withdrawal quickly spurs increased youth engagement:** In this poll fielded between eight and eleven days after Biden's withdrawal from the presidential election, nearly four-in-ten U.S. youth indicated increased support for the democratic candidate, while one quarter of U.S. youth indicated increased support for the republican candidate.
- **High registration middling intentions:** While eight-in-ten U.S. youth are registered to vote, only around five-in-ten reported a high-likelihood of voting at the time of this poll.

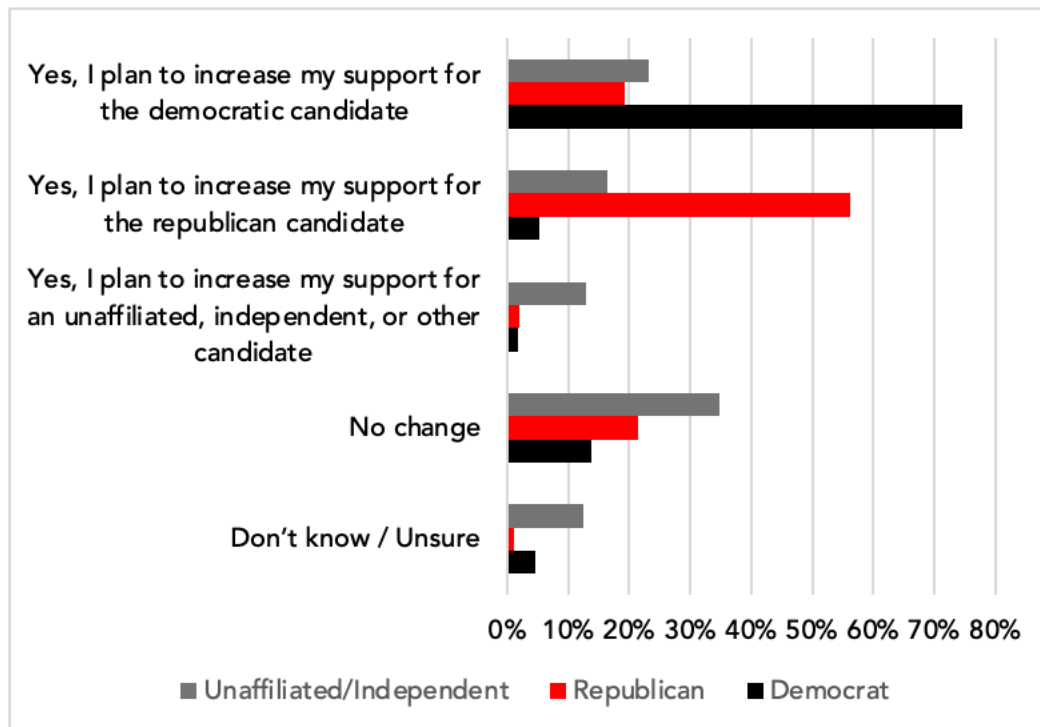
Biden's withdrawal effect on youth voting intentions

Among U.S. youth at the time of the survey (July 29 to August 5, 2024), 38% said that the news of President Joe Biden withdrawing from the election on July 21, made them increase their support the Democratic candidate. A smaller percentage, 24%, indicated that Biden dropping out made them increase their support for the Republican candidate, and 24% said there was no change in their support either way.

QUESTION: Did the withdrawal of President Joe Biden from the 2024 Presidential Election (on July 21, 2024) change your plans to support (campaign, donate, vote, etc.) a presidential candidate in the 2024 presidential election? Would you say...(N= 1,675, 18+ year-olds)

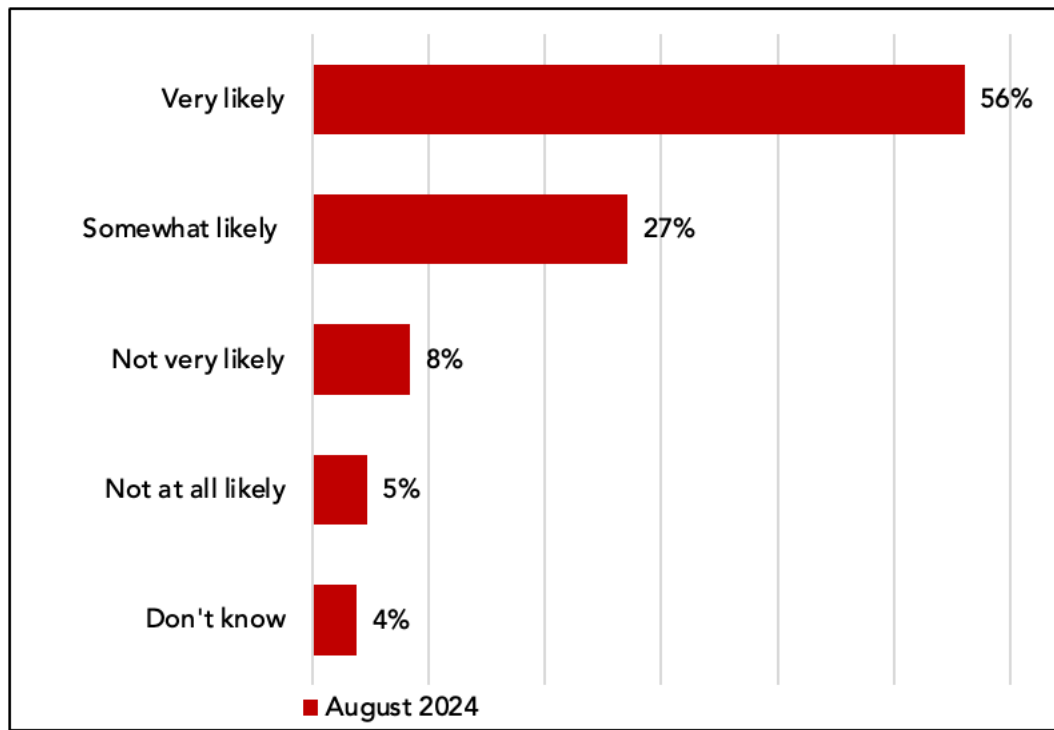


QUESTION: Same as above with responses broken down by party affiliation.

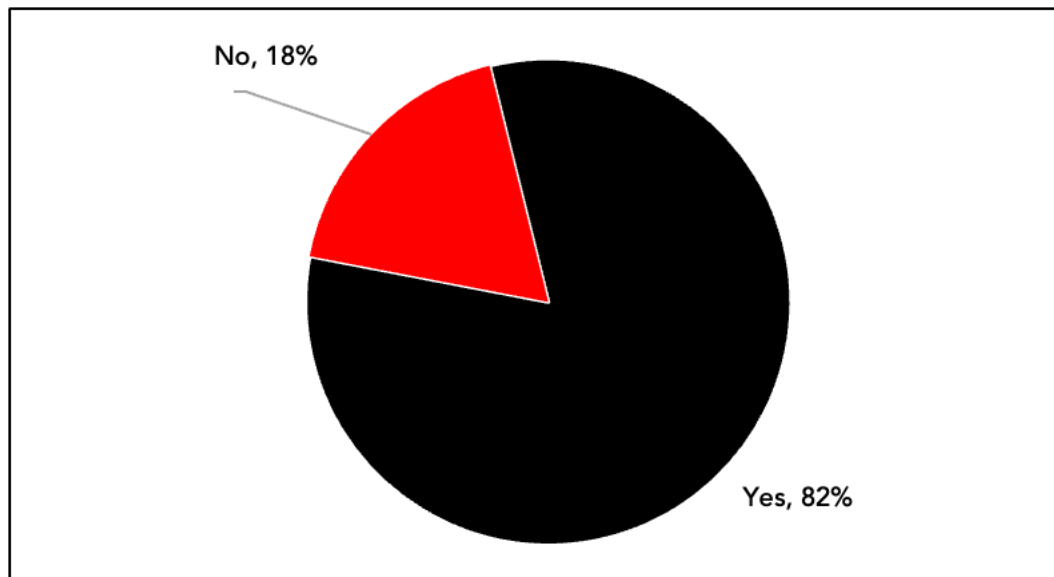


U.S. youth 2024 voting registration and voting intentions

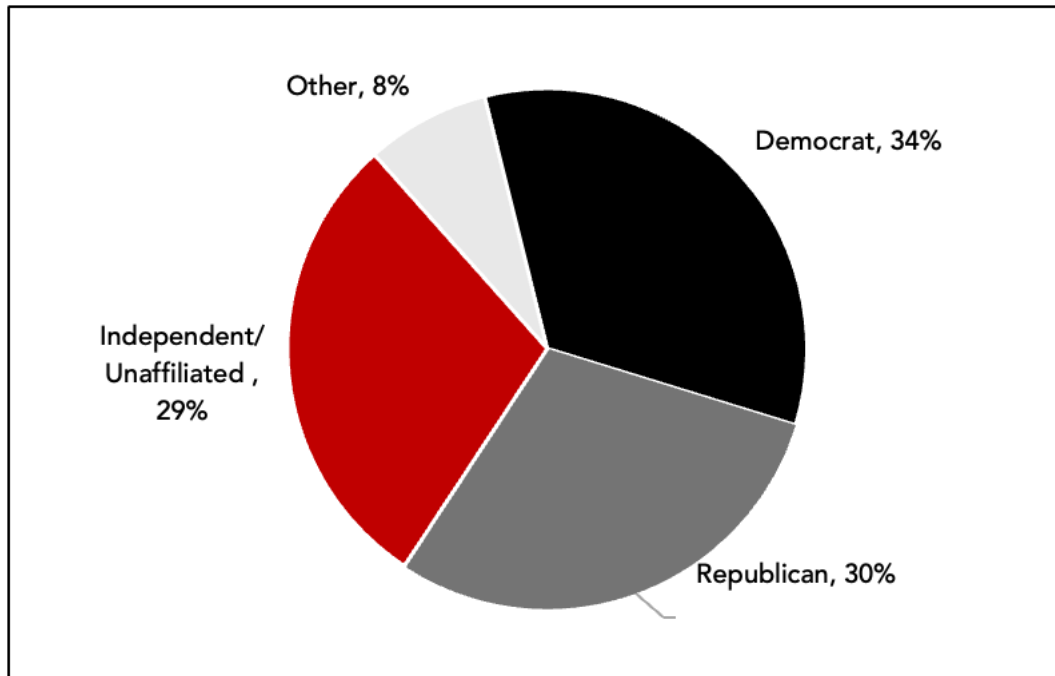
QUESTION: And, how likely are you to vote in the upcoming 2024 Presidential Election? (N= 1,675, 18+ year-olds)



QUESTION: Are you registered to vote? (N= 1,675, 18+ year-olds)

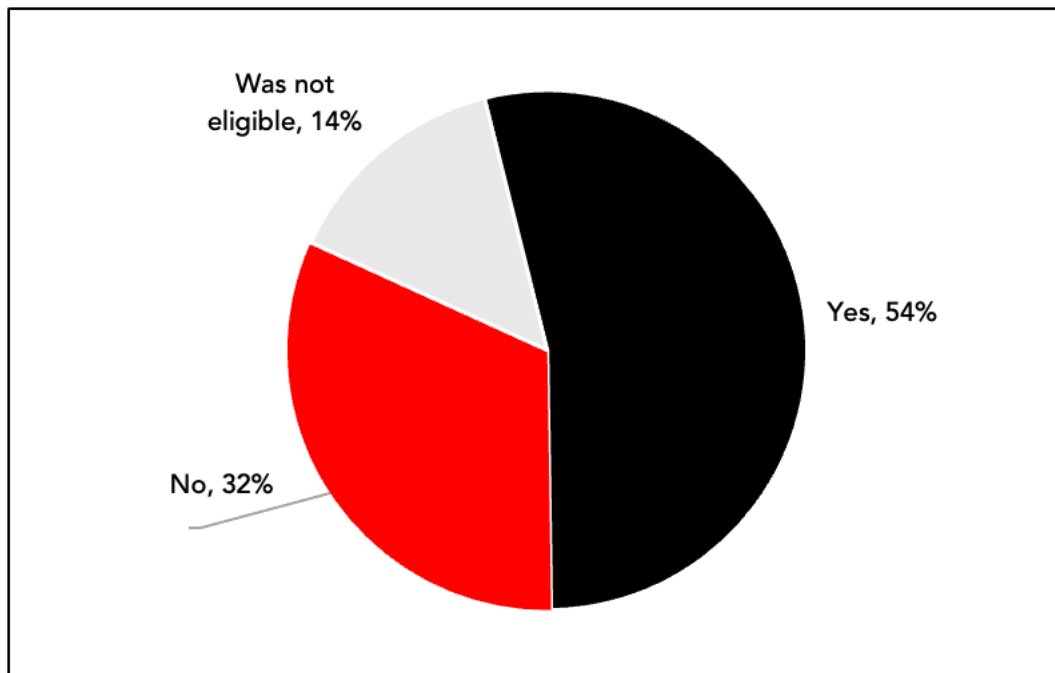


QUESTION: What is your current political party affiliation? (N= 1,675, 18+ year-olds)

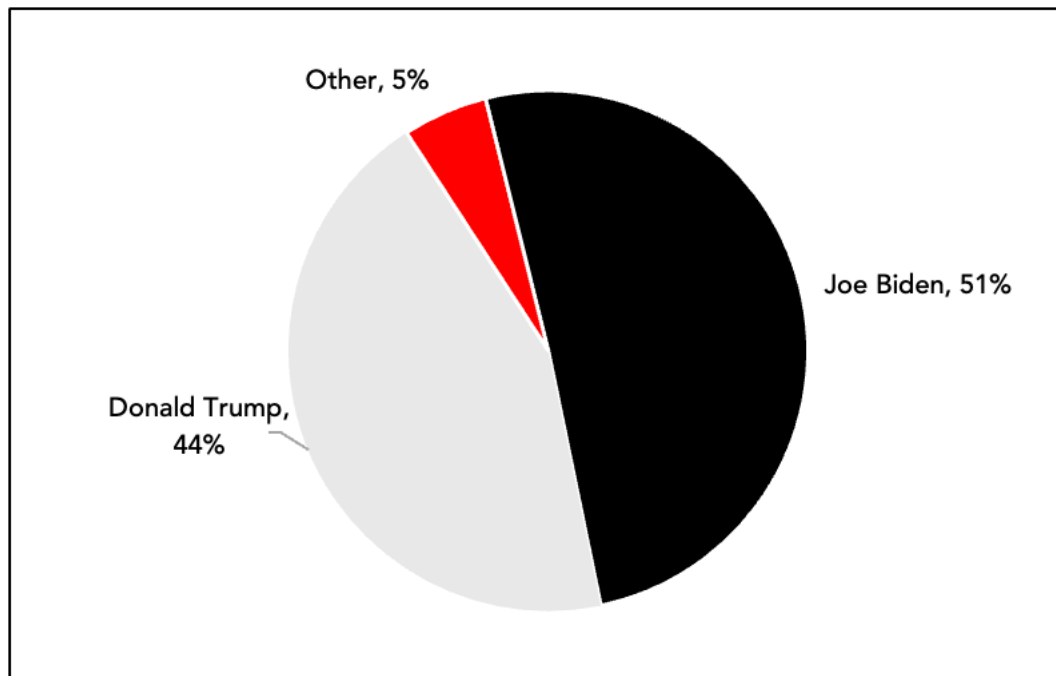


U.S. youth voting in 2020 presidential election

QUESTION: Did you vote in the 2020 Presidential Election? (N= 1,675, 18+ year-olds)



QUESTION: Who did you vote for in the 2020 Presidential election? (N= 896, 18+ year-olds that voted in the 2020 election)



Acknowledgements

This survey and report were a team project that would not have been possible without the dedicated contributions and support of the professional communities at Sacred Heart University and GreatBlue Research, Inc. In particular, the authors would like to thank:

- Michael Vigeant (CEO of GreatBlue Research) and his dedicated staff
- Elizabeth Koscinski (assistant director of communications), Ira Morrison (writing and media consultant) and the rest of the marketing & communications team at Sacred Heart University
- Jim Castonguay (associate dean) and Jim McQueeny (fellow) of the School of Communication, Media & the Arts at Sacred Heart University

Methodology

The survey was developed and conducted by the Institute for Sustainability & Social Justice at Sacred Heart University in collaboration with GreatBlue Research, Inc. The research aimed to understand U.S. youth's awareness, perceptions and attitudes toward sustainability, social justice and climate change as well as the role higher education in addressing these issues.

Areas of Investigation

The survey explored several key areas:

- **Awareness and familiarity:** U.S. youth's understanding of sustainability and social justice, and alignment with a broad and inclusive definition of sustainability.
- **Role of higher education:** Opinions on the responsibility of government, businesses, and particularly higher education in tackling sustainability and social justice challenges.
- **Importance and drivers:** The importance that U.S. youth place on sustainability and social justice, and the factors that motivate action on these issues.
- **Climate change concerns and confidence to act:** Gauging the level of concern about climate change among U.S. youth and its perceived connection to sustainability and social justice.
- **Demographic profile:** Collection of demographic information to ensure representativeness of the sample.

Methodology Highlights

- **Survey method:** Digital survey
- **Sample size:** N=2,000
- **Target audience:** U.S. residents aged 15 to 29
- **Poll margin of error:** 95% confidence interval margin of error $\pm 2.1\%$
- **Fielding period:** July 29 – August 5, 2024

Survey Programming and Pre-testing

The web survey was thoroughly tested across multiple platforms, including PC/laptop and mobile devices, by both GreatBlue Research staff and Sacred Heart University researchers. The GreatBlue Research project management team also reviewed test data in SPSS to ensure that the survey logic, including any randomizations, functioned correctly prior to launching the survey.

To further validate the survey process, a **pre-test** was conducted using 10% of the final sample (approximately N=200) over a 24-hour period. The pre-test data were carefully reviewed to identify any unforeseen issues with live data collection. Once confirmed that no problems were present, full-scale fielding was launched.

Data Collection

A random sample of U.S. residents aged 15-29 was invited to participate through opt-in digital panels. The sample was stratified by gender, age and geographic region to ensure broad representation.

Data Quality Assurance

To maintain data quality, GreatBlue Research implemented a series of checks. These included identifying respondents who engaged in satisficing behavior, such as leaving questions blank, speeding through the survey or consistently selecting the first or last response option. This ensured that only high-quality data were included in the final analysis.

Weighting

Results were weighted according to age and race, based on targets derived from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Sub-Group Analysis Margin of Error

95% confidence interval margin of error for sub-groups analyzed was as follows:

By age

15-17 YOs: $\pm 5.39\%$

18-21 YOs: $\pm 4.26\%$

22-24 YOs: $\pm 3.57\%$

25-29 YOs: $\pm 4.65\%$

By census region:

Northeast: $\pm 5.30\%$

Midwest: $\pm 4.97\%$

South: $\pm 3.32\%$

West: $\pm 4.58\%$

By political affiliation:

Democrats: $\pm 4.07\%$

Republicans: $\pm 4.35\%$

Independent/Unaffiliated: $\pm 4.38\%$