



# New Next100 and GenForward Survey Reveals Young Adults Lack Trust in a Government that Feels Distant

APRIL 12, 2022 – FRANCISCO MIGUEL ARAIZA, DR CATHY J. COHEN, AND EMMA VADEHRA

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The decisions and actions of the government have disparate impacts on underserved communities, including low-income individuals and people of color, who too often receive less than what they need to thrive. In addition, these communities are not only the most impacted by our policy choices, they are also the least likely to be included in the policymaking process. The undeniable truth is that those who make our policy choices are disproportionately white, male, and wealthy.

We suspect that the disconnect between the communities most impacted by public policy and who has the power to make policy choices is a critical piece of the context that informs why trust in government is so low, and why those underrepresented within the government are not effectively served by the government.

That's why Next100 partnered with GenForward to better understand how the next generation perceive their government. Next100 is a public policy leadership development program and think tank working to change the face and future of progressive policy by addressing the historical exclusion of individuals and communities from the policymaking table. GenForward hosts a first-of-its-kind, nationally representative, quarterly survey of 18- to 36-year-olds, with oversamples of Black, Asian, and Latinx young adults.

In this article, we present our survey findings. For a fuller analysis of these findings, we recommend you read our commentary on the survey here.

## Our Findings at a Glance

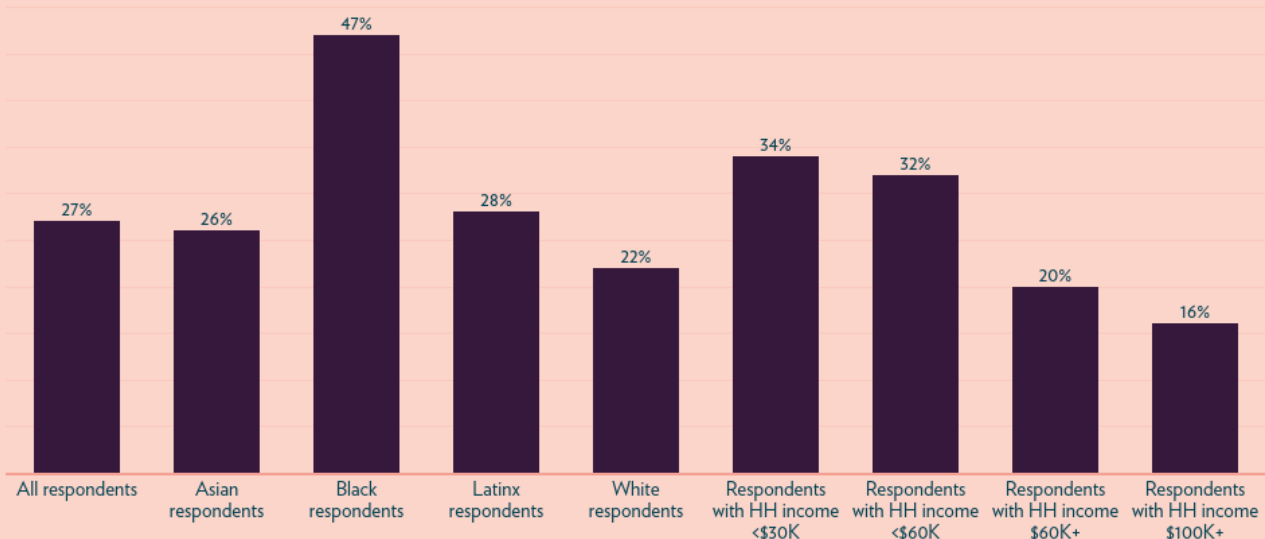
- Black respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 were the least likely to feel like full and equal citizens in our country.
- Respondents had low levels of trust in local and state government as well as in the federal government, and trust in government in general was especially low among Black respondents and individuals with a household income below \$60,000.
- An overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they were more likely to trust government leaders when they were from the respondents' own communities; however, federal and local governments (and their leaders) were perceived as lacking diversity and connections with the communities they represent.
- In addition to believing that government leaders do not come from their communities,

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This report can be found online at: <https://thenext100.org/new-next100-and-genforward-survey-reveals-young-adults-lack-trust-in-a-government-that-feels-distant/>

FIGURE 1

Share of respondents that somewhat/strongly disagreed with statement, "Generally, I feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have."



respondents also believed that government leaders lack an understanding of their respective community's challenges and needs.

- Very few respondents believed that the federal or local government wanted to hire them, and even fewer wanted to work for the federal or local government.
- While a slight majority of respondents rated voting as an effective method of making change in their communities, all groups of respondents reported low levels of political engagement or activity, with individuals from communities of color and households roughly below the median income being the least likely to engage in or plan to engage in voting or many other forms of making change.<sup>1</sup>

### About the Survey

In total, the survey included 3,279 interviews of a nationally representative sample of young adults ages 18-36, which were conducted through both web-based (includes cell phone, tablet, and desktop responses) and telephone modalities. The survey was conducted in late November and

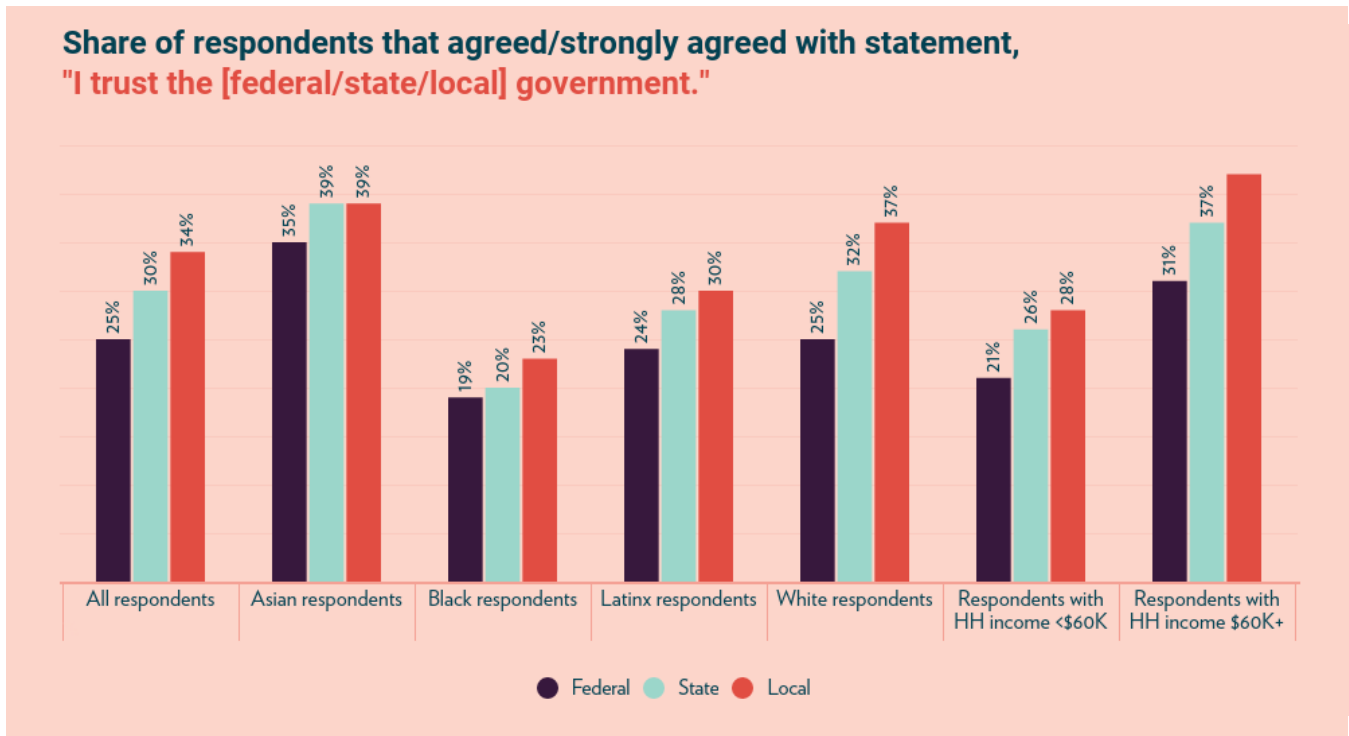
early December 2021. Please see the methodology section at the end of this piece for additional technical information.

## Survey Results and Findings

**Finding 1: Black respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 were the least likely to feel like full and equal citizens in our country.**

Nearly half of all Black respondents (47 percent) and one-third (32 percent) of respondents with a household income below \$60,000 somewhat or strongly disagree with the statement, "Generally, I feel like a full and equal citizen in this country with all the rights and protections that other people have." Furthermore, Black respondents were over two times as likely as white respondents to somewhat or strongly disagree with that statement (see Figure 1). Similarly, when compared with respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher, respondents with a household income below \$60,000 were 1.6 times more likely to somewhat or strongly disagree; that disparity increased to twice as likely when we compared respondents with a household income below \$30,000 to respondents with a household income of \$100,000 and higher.

FIGURE 2



**Finding 2: Respondents had low levels of trust in local and state government as well as in the federal government, and trust in government in general was especially low among Black respondents and individuals with a household income below \$60,000.**

The survey revealed fairly consistent low levels of trust in government among respondents. Overall, only one in four respondents indicated that they trust the federal government (see Figure 2). Even local governments, which had the highest rates of trust among all respondents, peaked at a relatively low rate of one in three. Notably, levels of trust were lowest among Black respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000. Those levels of trust stand in sharp contrast to that of respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher, whose lowest level of trust (31 percent for the federal government) was greater than the highest level of trust for government by Black respondents (23 percent for local government) or respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (28 percent for local government).

These findings point toward a clear tension between historically excluded communities, particularly Black and low-income communities, and the government.

**Finding 3: An overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they were more likely to trust government leaders when they were from the respondents' own communities; however, federal and local governments (and their leaders) were perceived as lacking diversity and connections with the communities they represent.**

More than 60 percent of respondents reported that they were more likely to trust government leaders when they were from the respondents' own communities (see Figure 3). However, respondents were keenly aware that—despite reaching record-breaking levels of diversity—our government was still not reflective of our nation's diversity. Approximately 25 percent of respondents believed the federal government was diverse, and only a slightly higher share (29 percent) believed their local government was diverse (see Figure 4).

Furthermore, fewer than one in five of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that federal leaders “come from communities like mine.” Black respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 were the least likely to agree with that statement (see Figure 5). Overall,

FIGURE 3

Share of respondents that somewhat/strongly agreed with statement, "When leaders in government are from my community, I am more likely to trust them."

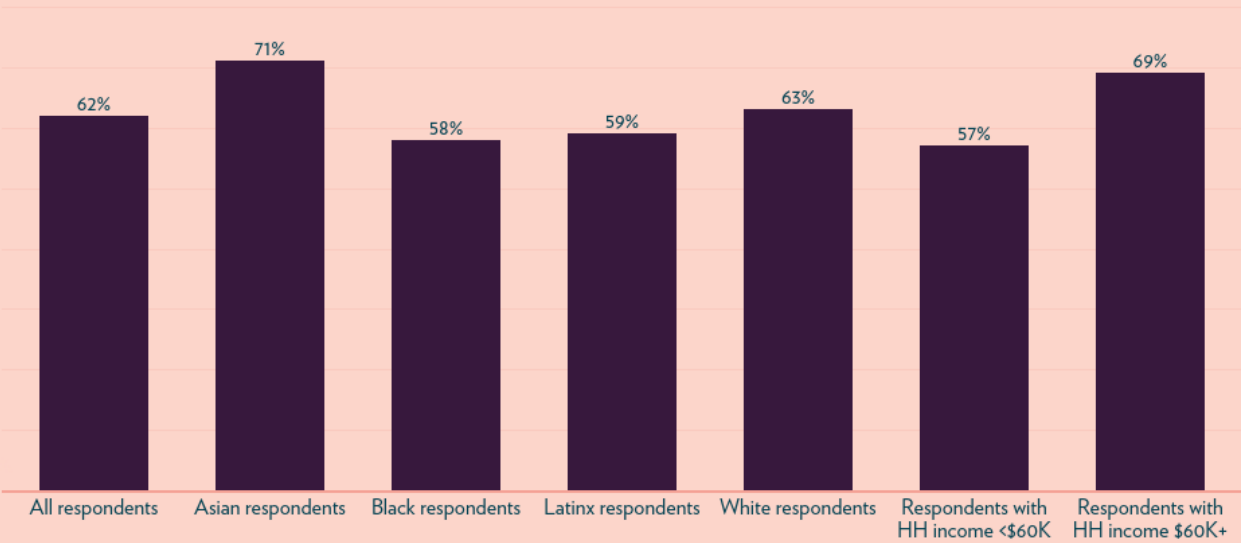


FIGURE 4

Share of respondents that agreed/strongly agreed with statement, "I believe that the [federal/local] government is diverse in terms of age, race, sexual orientation, and gender."

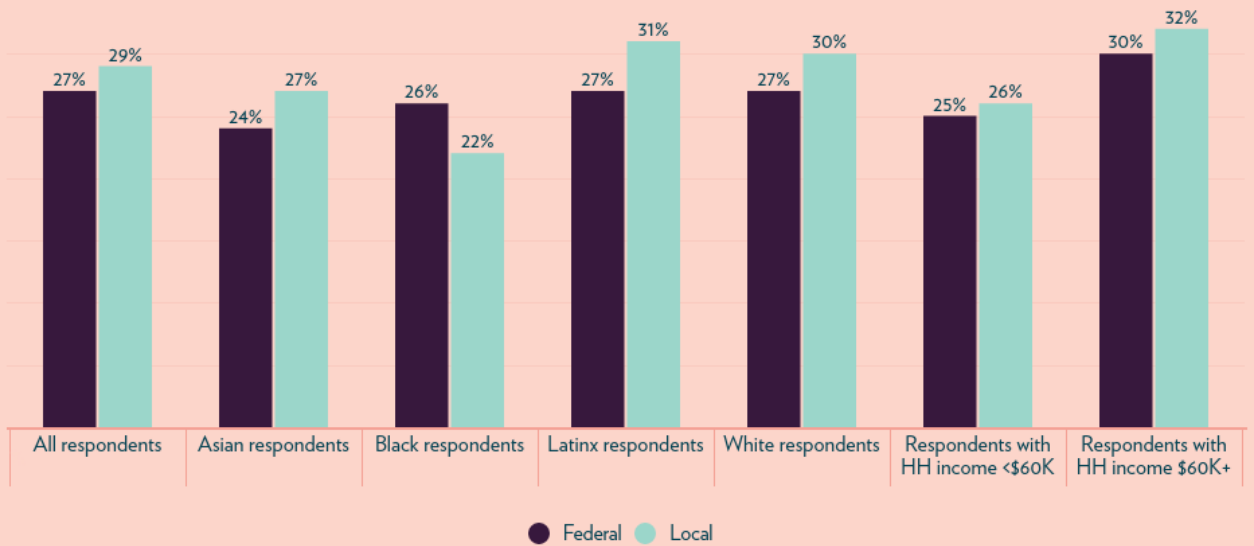
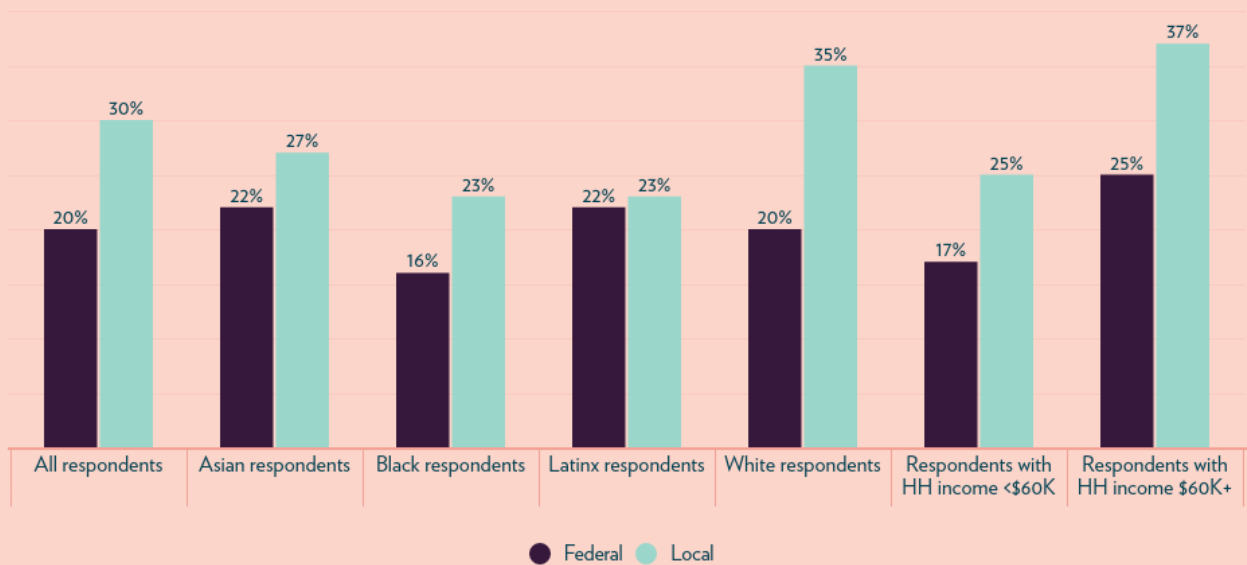


FIGURE 5

Share of respondents that agreed/strongly agreed with statement, "The leaders in [federal/local] government care about people like me."



respondents were nearly twice as likely to agree or strongly agree that local leaders “come from communities like mine” (33 percent), as compared to federal leaders (17 percent). Given the well-documented and continuous reporting on the wealth of congressional members, it is not surprising that respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher were 1.5 times more likely to agree or strongly agree that federal and local leaders come from “communities like mine” than respondents with a household income below \$60,000. A similar trend emerged between white respondents, who were 1.6 times more likely to agree or strongly agree that local leaders come from “communities like mine” than were Black and Latinx respondents.

**Finding 4: In addition to believing that government leaders do not come from their communities, respondents also believed that government leaders lack an understanding of their respective community’s challenges and needs.**

Only one in five respondents agreed or strongly agreed that leaders in the federal government “care about people like me.” Consistent with other findings in the survey, Black respondents and respondents with a household income

below \$60,000 were the least likely to agree with this statement, 16 percent and 17 percent respectively (see Figure 6). Overall, respondents were nearly 1.5 times more likely to agree or strongly agree that leaders in the local government “care about people like me” when compared to leaders in the federal government. The disparity is largely driven by white respondents, who were more likely to agree or strongly agree that leaders in local government “care about people like me” (35 percent) when compared to their beliefs about leaders in the federal government (20 percent). Across different demographic groups, the data also revealed that white respondents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that leaders in the local government “care about people like me” than respondents of color, especially Black and Latinx respondents. Similarly, respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher were nearly 1.5 times more likely to agree or strongly agree that federal and local leaders “care about people like me” than respondents with a household income below \$60,000.

The survey results highlighted additional evidence of a disconnect between federal and local leaders and communities. When respondents were asked if leaders “relate to the challenges communities like mine face,” the

FIGURE 6

Share of respondents that somewhat/strongly agreed with statement, "When leaders in government are from my community, I am more likely to trust them."

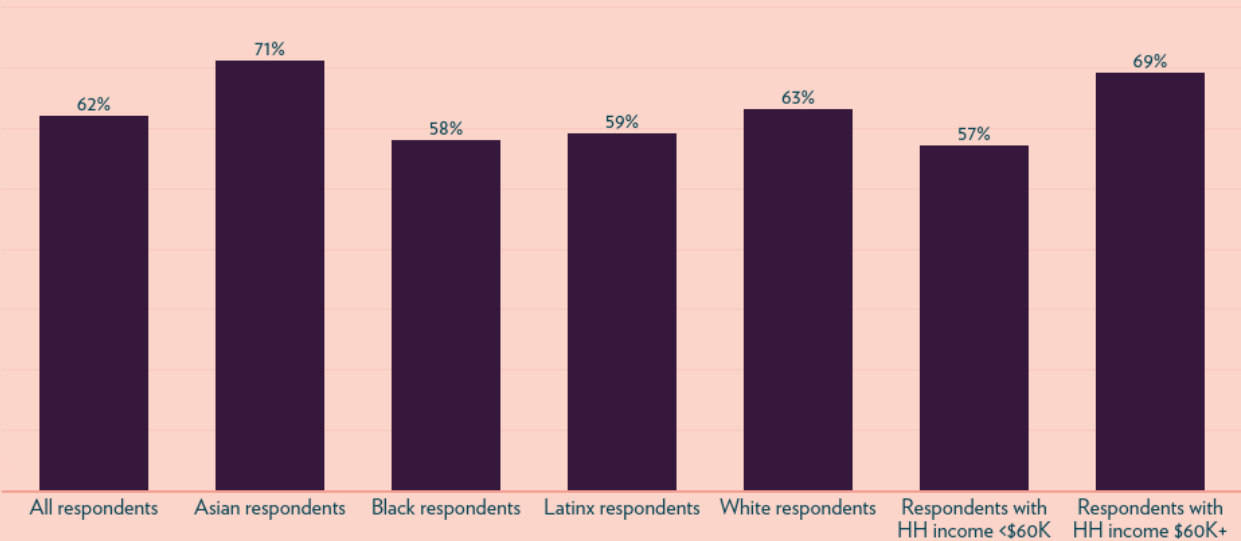


FIGURE 7

Share of respondents that agreed/strongly agreed with statement, "I believe that the [federal/local] government is diverse in terms of age, race, sexual orientation, and gender."

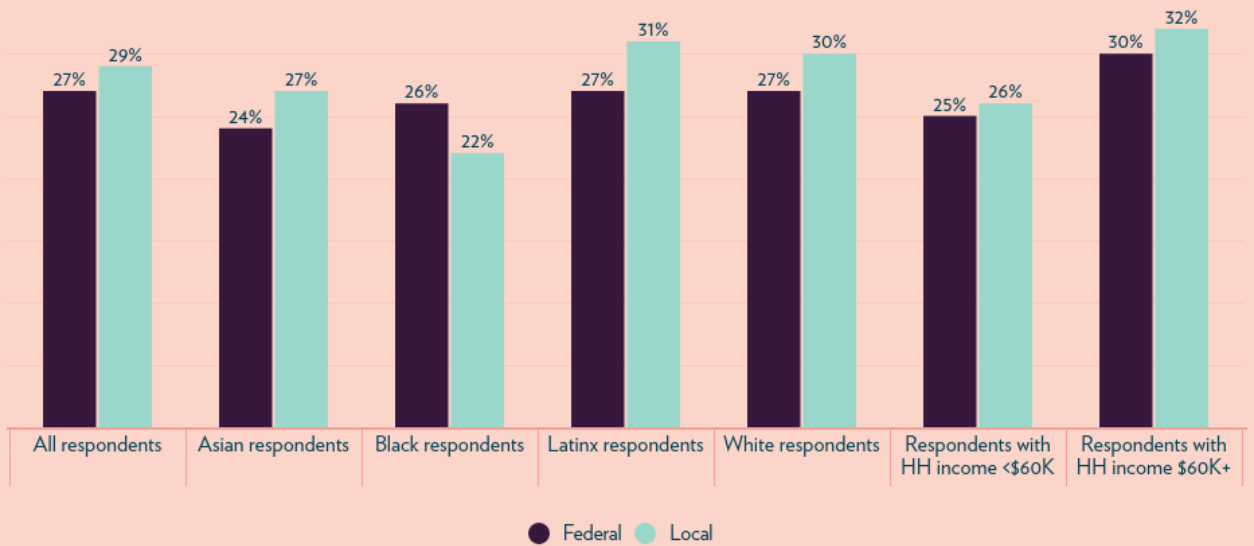
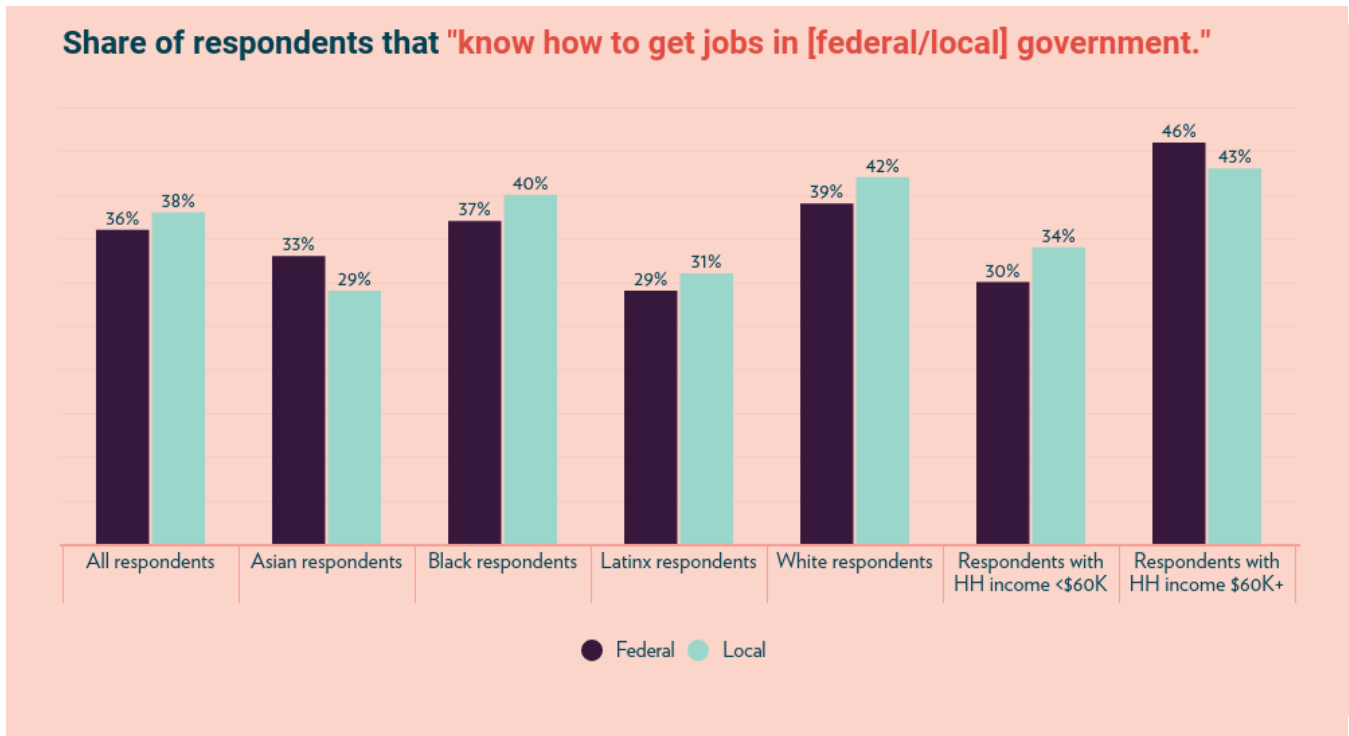


FIGURE 8



responses mirrored the demographic trends in many of the findings described above. Namely, local government leaders were consistently rated higher than federal leaders, and white respondents and respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher were much more likely to agree with the statement than Black and Latinx respondents or respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (see Figure 7).

**Finding 5: Very few respondents believed that the federal or local government wanted to hire them, and even fewer wanted to work for the federal or local government.**

Approximately one in four respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the federal or local government “wants to hire people like me.” Black respondents (19 percent) and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (20 percent) were the least likely to believe that the federal government “wants to hire people like me.” Generally, the data gathered for this question captured much less variability from respondents when considering the different levels of government than did the data for other questions. However, differences did appear across groups that were

consistent with other questions in the survey. Specifically, respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher were approximately 1.5 times more likely to agree or strongly agree with this statement than respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (see Figure 8). While more than one in three respondents reported knowing how to get a job in federal and local government (see Figure 9), only one in five respondents expressed an interest in wanting to work for the federal government, with fewer still reporting an interest in working for local government (see Figure 10). Unlike many other cases in which Black respondents had the lowest positive response rates among racial and ethnic groups, Latinx and Asian respondents were the least likely to “know how to get jobs” in federal or local government, along with respondents with a household income below \$60,000.

**Finding 6: While a majority of respondents rated voting as an effective method of making change in their communities, all groups of respondents reported low levels of political engagement or activity, with individuals from communities of color and households below the median income being the least likely to engage in or plan to engage in voting or many other forms of making change.**



FIGURE 9

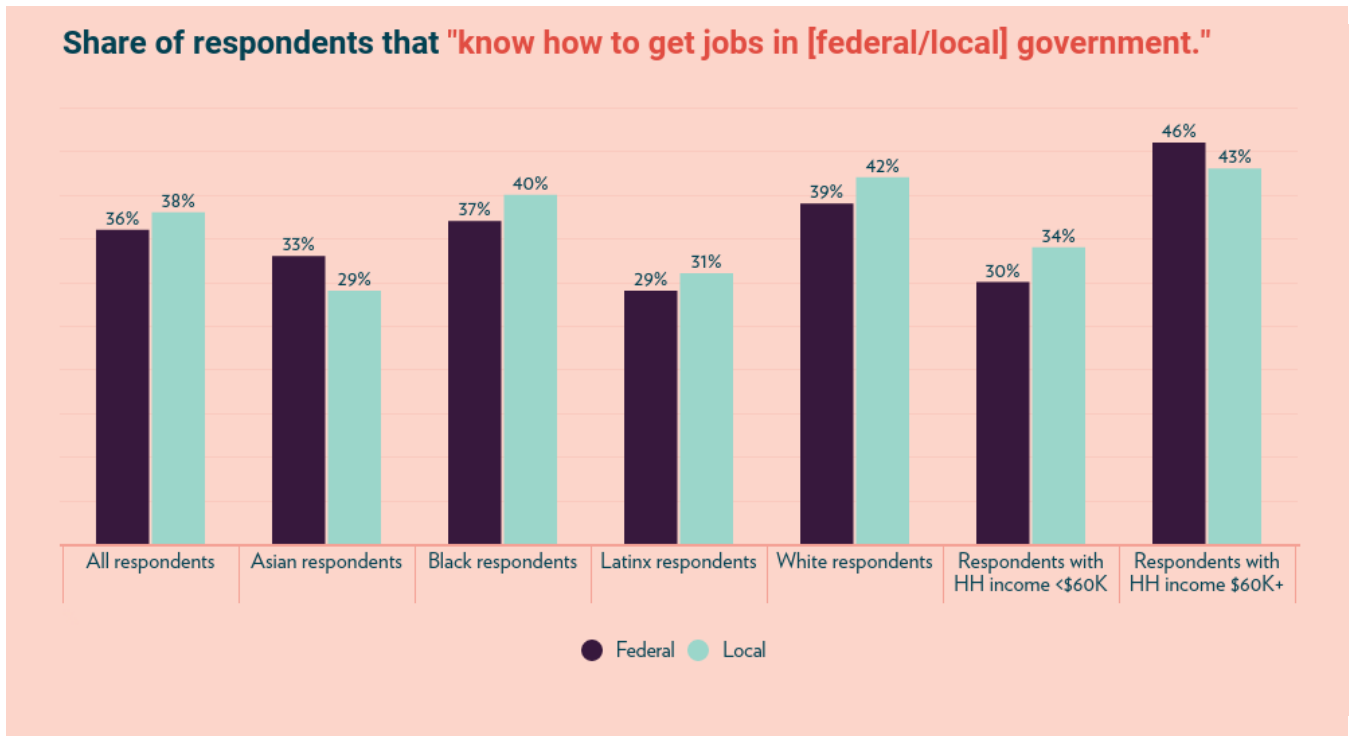


FIGURE 10

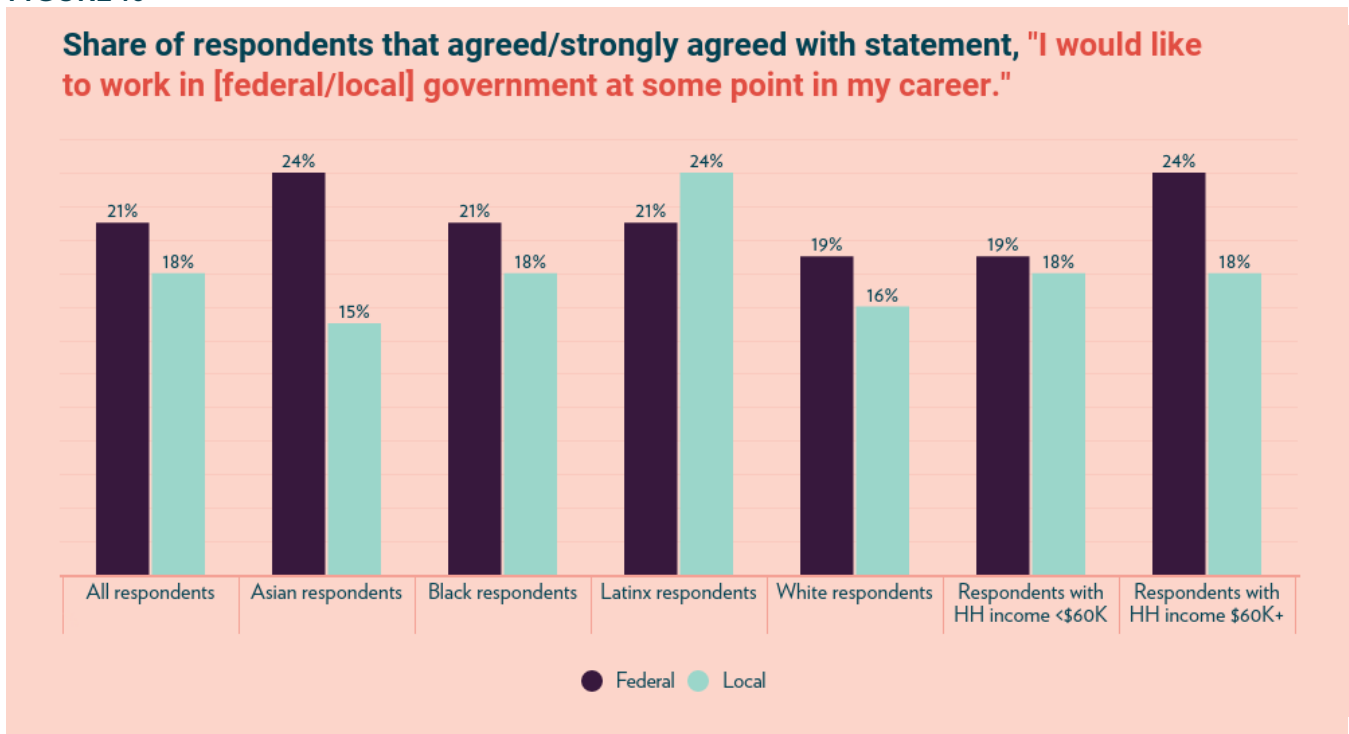
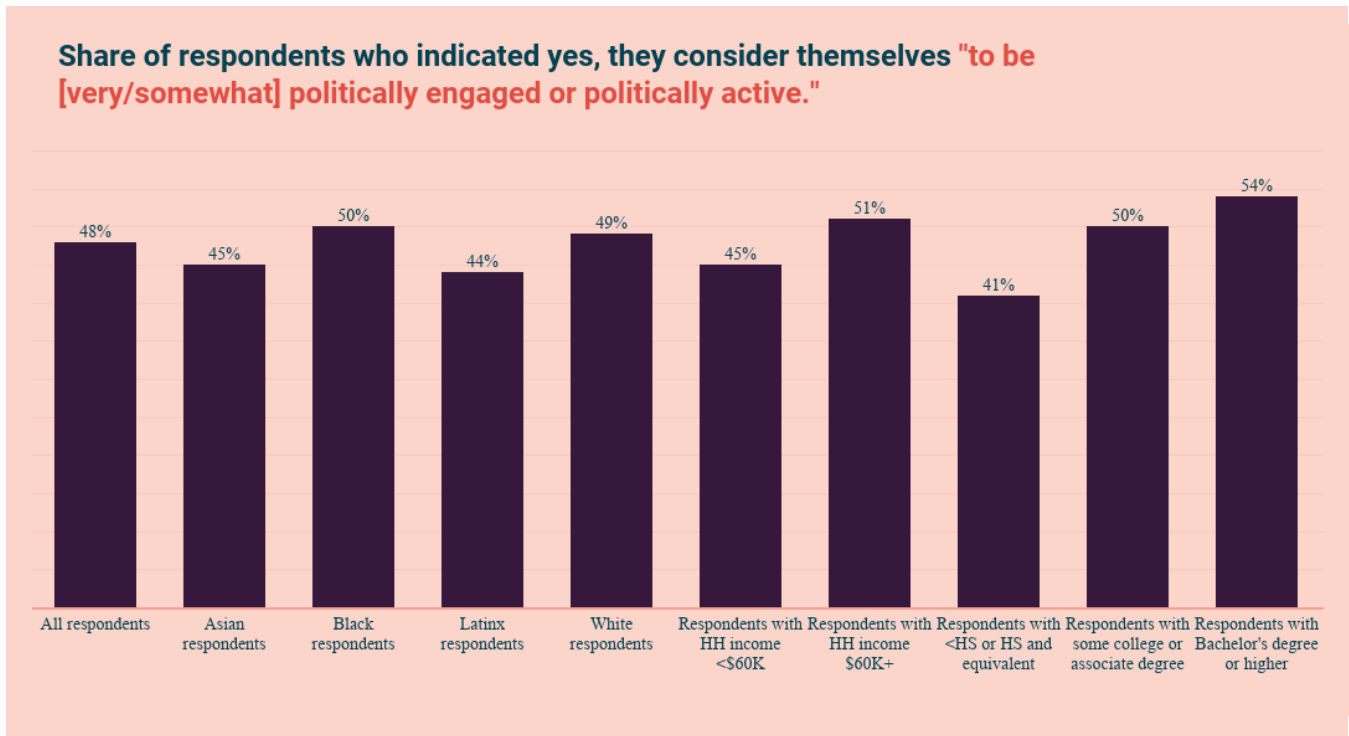


FIGURE 11



About half of respondents (48 percent) considered themselves politically engaged or active. Respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher (54 percent), respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher (51 percent), and Black respondents (50 percent) were the most likely to consider themselves politically engaged or active (see Figure 11). When asked about the effectiveness of several methods for making change in communities, five methods were identified as being somewhat/very effective by a majority of respondents: community service and volunteering; voting in state and local elections; working for nonprofit organizations that serve the respondent's community; organizing in the respondent's community; and voting in federal elections. Other methods for driving change in communities were much less likely to be identified as being effective, including working for the government, as well as signing a petition, participating in a political rally or protest, and sharing opinions or news articles on social media (see Figure 12). In many cases, Black and Latinx respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 rated the effectiveness of the named methods for making change lower than did their peers (see Figure 13). One notable exception was "sharing opinions or news articles on social media," which Black and Latinx respondents were more likely to rate as somewhat/

very effective; this is perhaps which is not surprising, given the role social media has played in recent social justice movements.

In addition to asking respondents about the effectiveness of methods of change, we also asked them about which methods of making change they had engaged in or planned to engage in. Unsurprisingly, we found that respondents who reported being politically engaged or active were much more likely to engage in making change in their community (see Figure 14). Overall, voting in federal elections was the top strategy in which respondents had engaged or planned to engage to make change in their communities, followed closely by voting in state and local elections; participation in the other methods for making change were all rated much lower (see Figure 15). Individuals from communities of color and individuals with a household income below \$60,000 were less likely to engage in voting (see Figure 16) or plan to engage in voting (see Figure 17).

## Where do we go from here?

These survey findings illustrate that there is a profound disconnect between the government and young adults, as

FIGURE 12

Share of respondents that rated the following methods for making change in their community as somewhat/very effective.

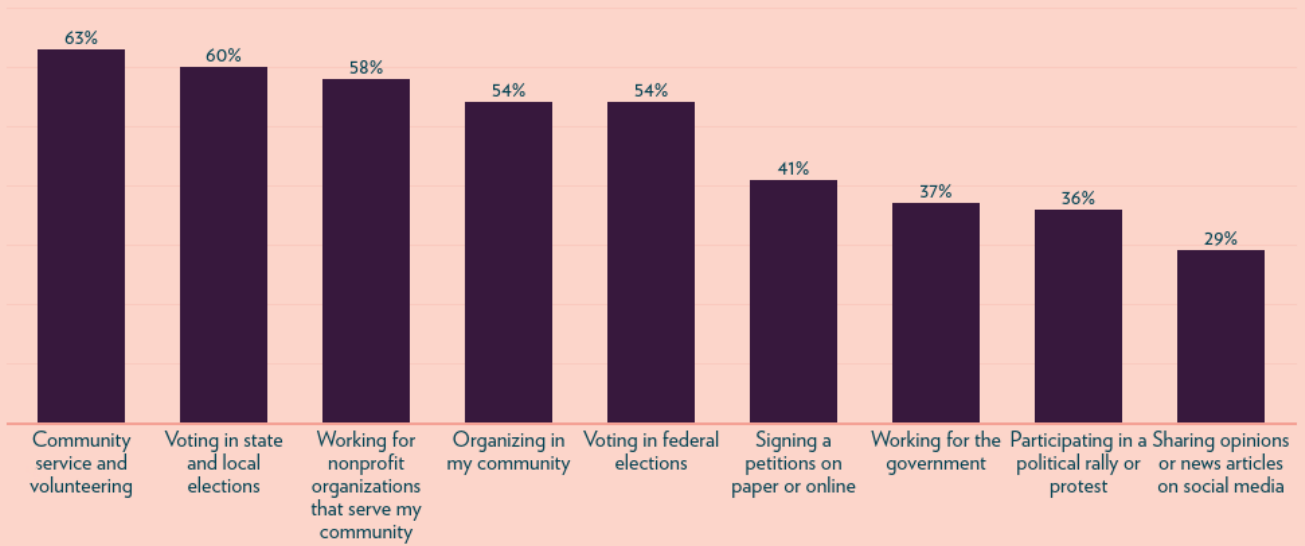


FIGURE 13

Share of respondents that rated the following methods for making change in their community "somewhat/very effective."

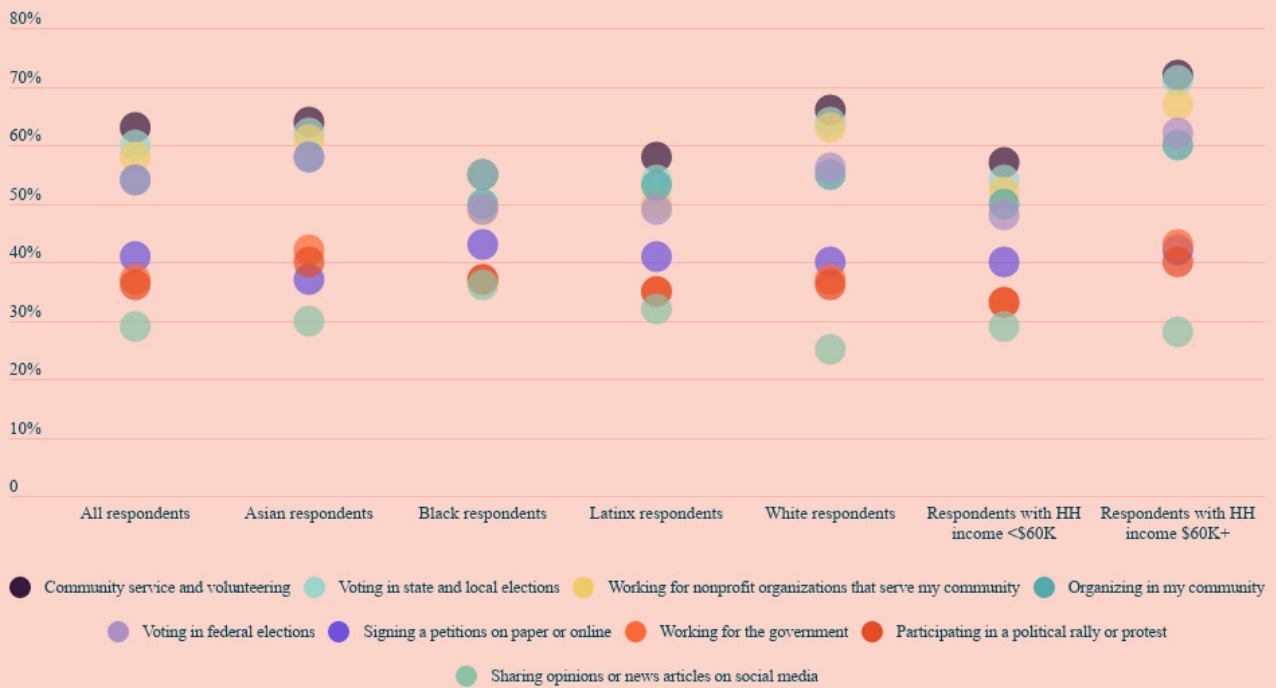


FIGURE 14

Share of respondents that "often/nearly always" engaged in the following methods of making change, by whether or not they are politically engaged or active.

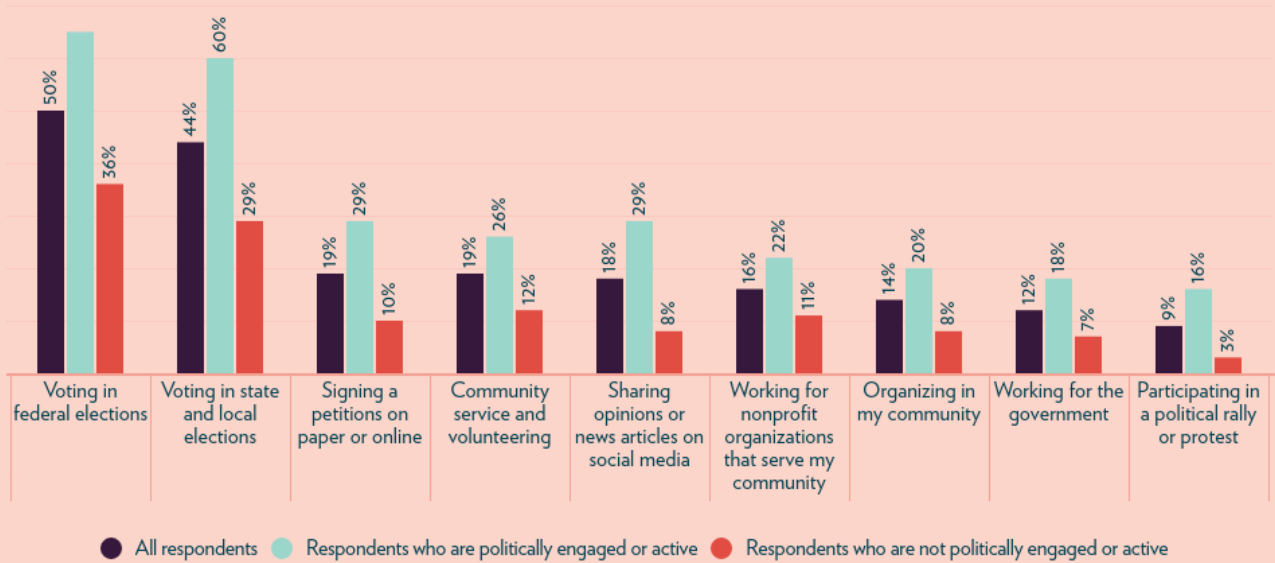


FIGURE 15

Share of respondents that "often/nearly always" engaged and plan to engage in the following methods for making change, in their community.



FIGURE 16

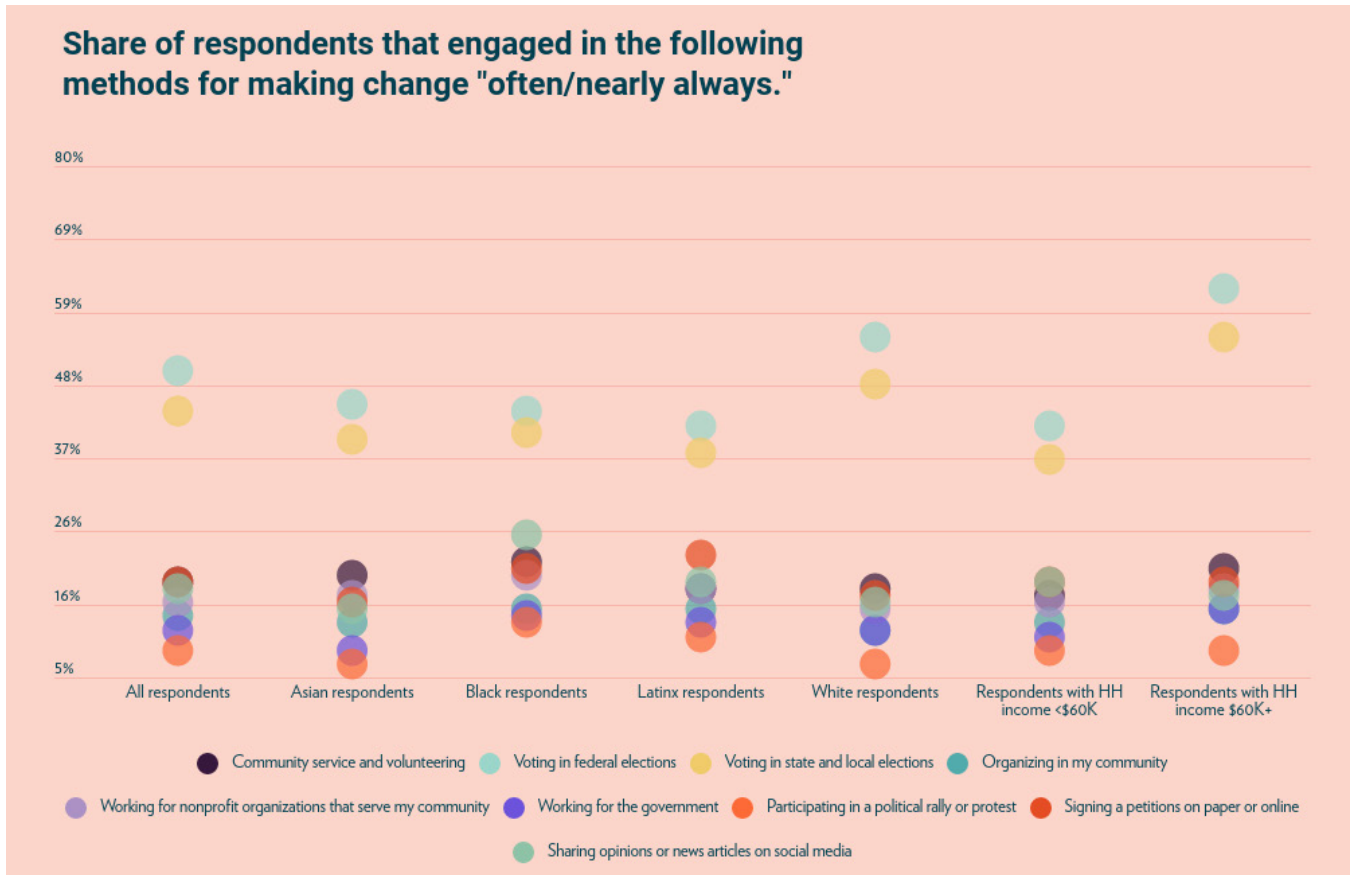
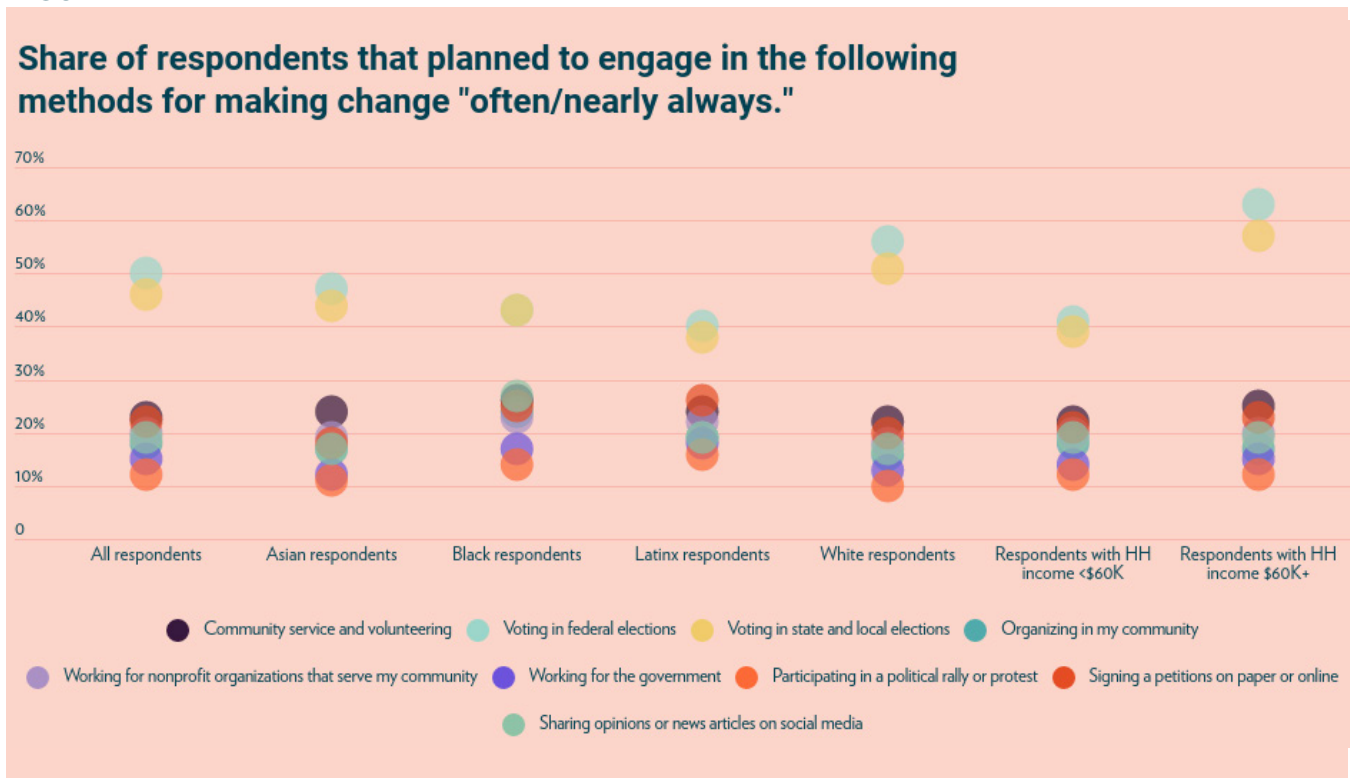


FIGURE 17



well as a lack of faith in government and public policy as vehicles for positive change. While these findings certainly paint a bleak outlook, for those who believe changes in public policy are part of the solution, one critical path forward is clear. Government leaders must work to build relationships with underserved communities, especially with individuals from communities of color and low-income households. But making the government more inclusive of directly impacted communities is not enough—this work must be coupled with policy agendas that reflect the needs and priorities of those communities. The inclusion and representation of historically excluded communities must be of the highest priority, because a healthy, equitable, and just democracy requires participation from and representation of members of all communities, not just in elected positions but at each level of government.

## Methodology

The GenForward November 2021 survey is a project of Professor Cathy J. Cohen at the University of Chicago. Interviews were conducted with a representative sample from GenForward, a nationally representative survey panel of adults ages 18–36 recruited and administered by NORC at the University of Chicago.

A total of 3,279 interviews were conducted between November 5 and November 19, 2021 with adults ages 18–36 representing the fifty states and the District of Columbia, including completed interviews with 856 African American young adults, 530 Asian American young adults, 761 Latinx young adults, 1018 white young adults, and 114 young adults with other racial and ethnic backgrounds. The survey was offered in English and Spanish and via telephone and web modes.

The GenForward survey was built from two sample sources:

Fifty-two percent of the completed interviews are sourced from NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel and from the Black Youth Project (BYP) panel of young adults recruited by NORC. Funded and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago, AmeriSpeak is a probability-based panel designed

to be representative of the U.S. household population. Randomly selected U.S. households are sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Frame and address-based sample, and then contacted by U.S. mail, telephone interviewers, overnight express mailers, and field interviewers (face to face). The BYP sample is from a probability-based household panel that uses an address-based sample from a registered voter database of the entire United States. Households were selected using stratified random sampling to support over-sampling of households with African Americans, Latinx Americans, and Asian Americans between the ages of 18 and 36. NORC contacted sampled households by U.S. mail and by telephone, inviting them to register and participate in public opinion surveys twice a month.

The AmeriSpeak panel sample was supplemented with respondents from the Dynata nonprobability online opt-in panel. Forty-eight percent of the completed interviews are sourced from the Dynata panel. To help to reduce potential bias in the nonprobability sample, Dynata attempted to balance the nonprobability respondent sample by age, race and ethnicity, gender, and partisanship. In order to incorporate the nonprobability sample, NORC used TrueNorth calibration services, an innovative hybrid calibration approach developed at NORC based on small area estimation methods in order to explicitly account for potential bias associated with the nonprobability sample. The purpose of TrueNorth calibration is to adjust the weights for the nonprobability sample so as to bring weighted distributions of the nonprobability sample in line with the population distribution for characteristics correlated with the survey variables. Such calibration adjustments help to reduce potential bias, yielding more accurate population estimates

Of the 3,279 completed interviews in the GenForward November 2021 survey, 99 percent were completed by web and 1 percent by telephone. The survey completion rate is 16.81 percent. The weighted AAPOR RR3 panel recruitment rate is 18.98 percent and the weighted household panel retention rate is 75.79 percent, for a weighted AAPOR RR3 cumulative response rate of 2.42 percent. The overall

margin of error is  $\pm 2.49$  percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. Among subgroups, the margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level is  $\pm 4.41$  percentage points for African Americans,  $\pm 5.39$  percentage points for Asian Americans,  $\pm 4.98$  percentage points for Latinx Americans, and  $\pm 3.80$  percentage points for white Americans.

To encourage cooperation, respondents were offered incentives for completing the survey that ranged from the cash-equivalent of \$3 to the cash-equivalent of \$10.

The interviews from the two probability-based sample sources were combined for statistical weighting and analysis. The combined panel samples provide sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. The statistical weights incorporate the appropriate probability of selection for the BYP and AmeriSpeak samples, nonresponse adjustments, and also, raking ratio adjustments to population benchmarks. A poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any noncoverage or under- and over-sampling resulting from the study-specific sample design. The poststratification process was done separately for each racial/ethnic group and involved the following variables: age, gender, education, Census Region, and partisanship. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults ages 18–36, and the 18–36-year-old populations for African Americans, Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, and non-Latinx white Americans, were used for all analyses unless otherwise noted.

## Authors

**Francisco Miguel Araiza** is the deputy executive director of Next100. He has spent his career leveraging research and data to advocate for more inclusive, just, and equitable public policies. His passion for public policy stems from his first-hand experience of social inequities as a low-income and undocumented youth.

**Cathy J. Cohen** is a professor at the University of Chicago and founder and director of the GenForward Research Project. She is the David and Mary Winton Green Professor of Political Science and former Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

**Emma Vadehra** is the executive director of Next100. She previously served as chief of staff at the U.S. Department of Education under Secretaries Arne Duncan and John B. King, Jr. and as senior education counsel for the late senator Edward M. Kennedy. She is an education policy wonk, an advocate for progressive policy change, and a believer in the next generation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The income threshold used throughout this commentary is \$60,000. According to the latest Census data, available at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>, the estimated median income in the U.S. was \$67,521 in 2020. At times in this commentary, we use “roughly below the median income” as shorthand for \$60,000 and below.