

# *New Activism*

*2020  
Global  
Communication  
Report*



USC ANNENBERG  
CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC RELATIONS



**2 0 2 0   G L O B A L  
C O M M U N I C A T I O N  
R E P O R T**

*USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations  
Los Angeles, California  
April 2020*



## FOREWORD

Every year, the USC Center for Public Relations chooses to study a topic or trend that is relevant to those working in the world's most dynamic profession. In previous years, we've examined the future of media, ethics and technology by surveying agency and in-house communicators around the globe. This year we chose activism, because we believe activists are playing an increasingly powerful role in our work, our society and our lives.

We realize that activism isn't new. Some of us remember marching for civil rights or protesting against the Vietnam War, and being inspired by charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Gloria Steinem and Nelson Mandela. But activism is evolving.

Changing politics, technologies and demographics have created a "New Activism." One that is more pervasive, more diverse and more democratic. While I love the retro image on the cover of this report, today's

activist is probably younger, more likely non-white and certainly more tech-savvy. Rather than protesting in public, she is mobilizing voters online or running for office.

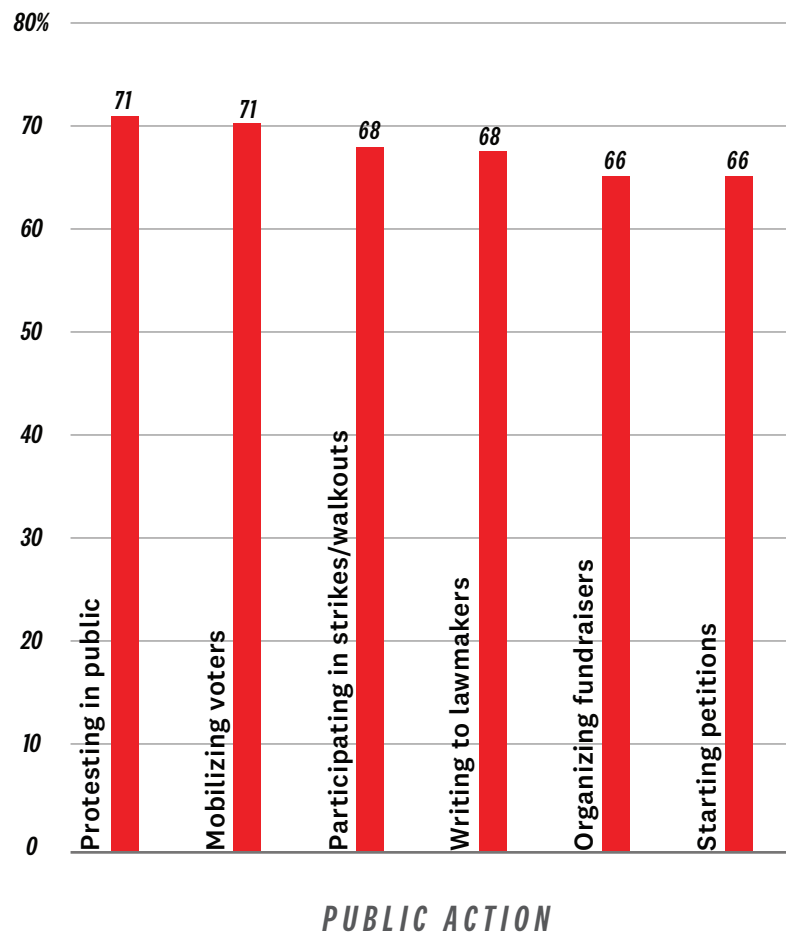
Based on separate surveys, this report explores the differences and similarities between activists and communication professionals and examines how their relationship will impact the future. As we have recently experienced, people around the world are frustrated by a lack of government leadership and are looking to the business community for innovative solutions. We believe New Activism presents a unique opportunity for those who promote brands to work with those who promote causes to solve the problems facing all of us.

— Fred Cook, Director, USC Annenberg Center for PR

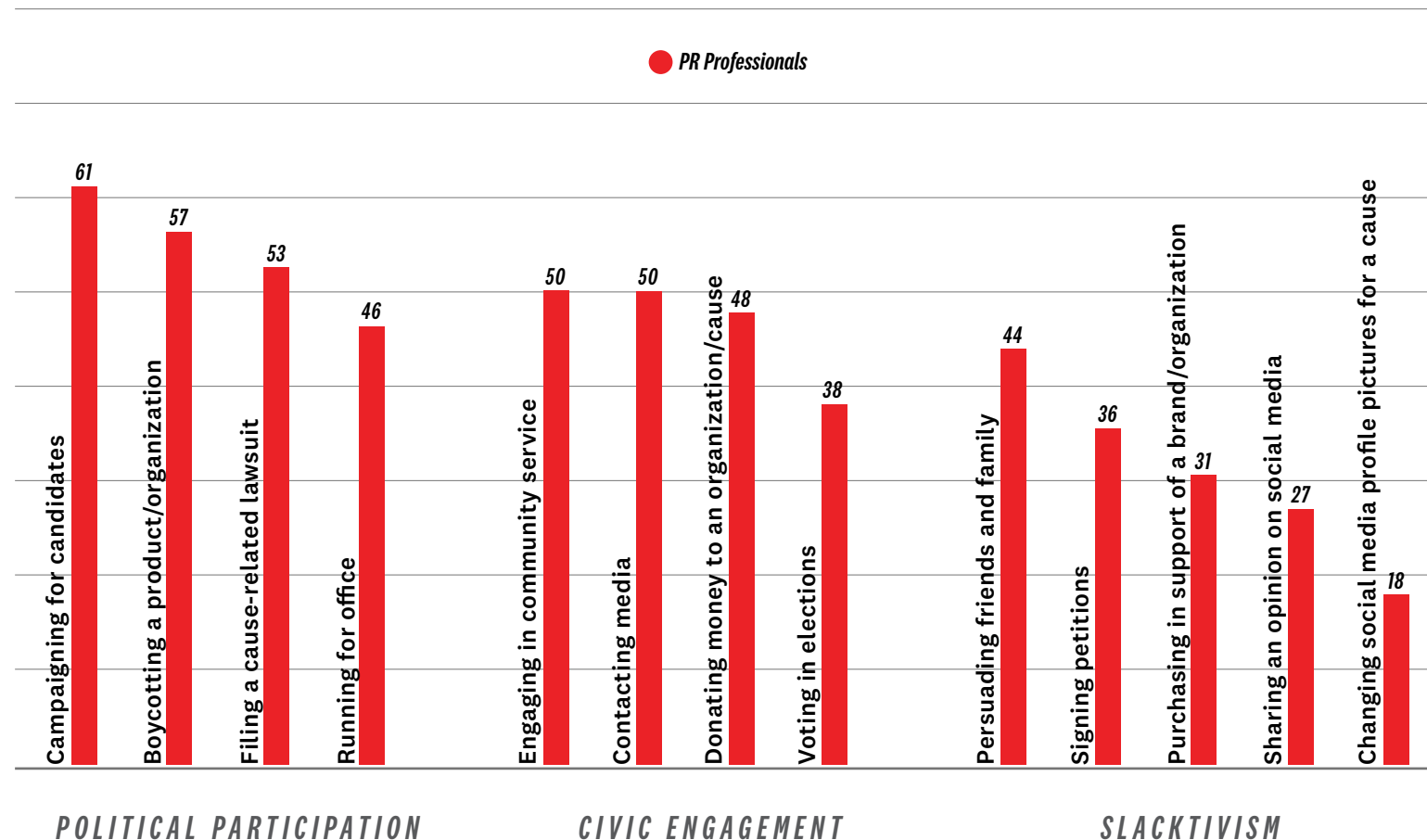


# DEFINING NEW ACTIVISM

Let's examine the activities many think define an activist. According to professional communicators, committed activists express their passion through public protests and walkouts, while increasing their political influence by campaigning, petitioning and running for office. They engage in their communities by donating and voting. Many people post their opinions on Facebook and purchase brands that share their values, but those activities alone do not qualify someone as an activist.



According to PR professionals, participation in the following activities determines if someone is a committed activist.



**“Today’s activists aren’t interested in lip service from corporations, politicians or peers. The goals go beyond just raising awareness for a cause—they are rooted in achieving authentic social and political change. That’s what makes activism so effective today.”**

**BRENDAN DUFF**

*Co-Founder, March For Our Lives*

**“Young people are very effectively using PR tools to rapidly spread the word about events and causes online through fun and accessible mediums.”**

**JAMIE MARGOLIN**

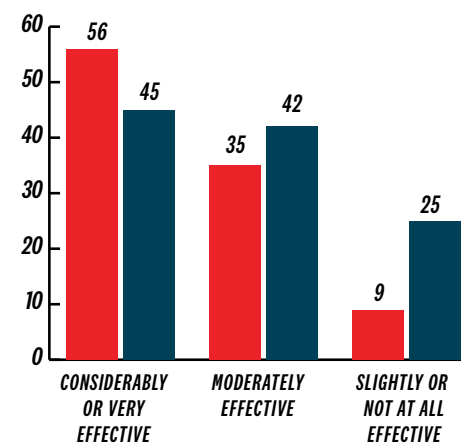
*Co-Founder, Zero Hour / Author, Youth to Power: Your Voice and How to Use It*

Professional communicators believe that activism is more effective in raising awareness of social issues (56%) than in influencing the political process (21%) or creating long-lasting change (12%). In fact, 44% of communicators are convinced that activists are not effective at achieving real change.

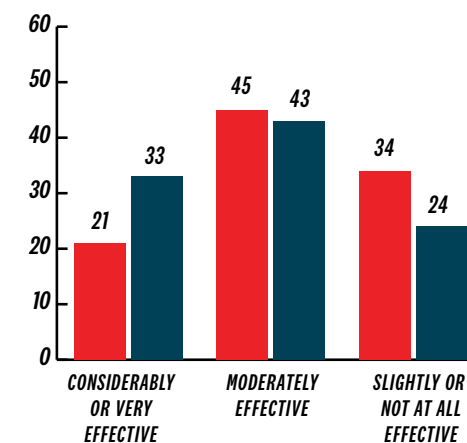
In a separate survey of citizens engaged in public action and politics, a much-higher percentage (32%) of present-day activists believe they are effective at creating long-lasting change. And like the PR industry, they are shaping new strategies to close the gap between temporary awareness and lasting results.

## HOW EFFECTIVE ARE PRESENT-DAY ACTIVISTS IN...

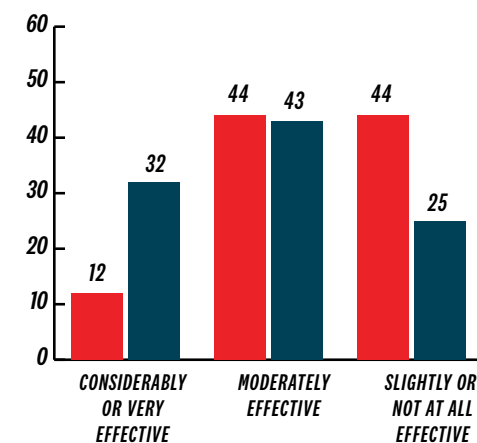
*Raising awareness of social issues*



*Influencing the political process*



*Achieving long-lasting change*

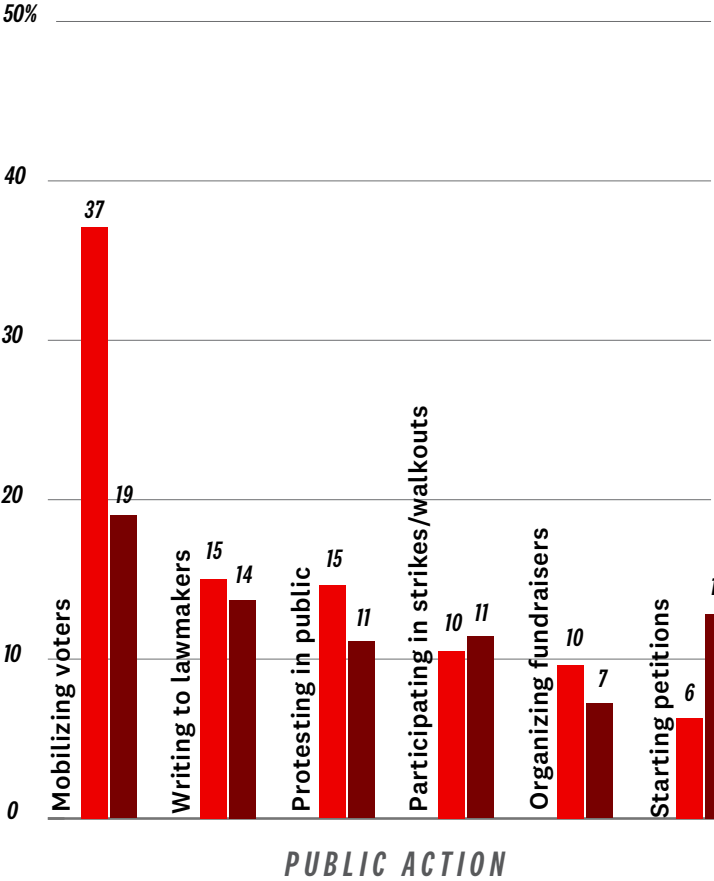


● PR Professionals ● Activists

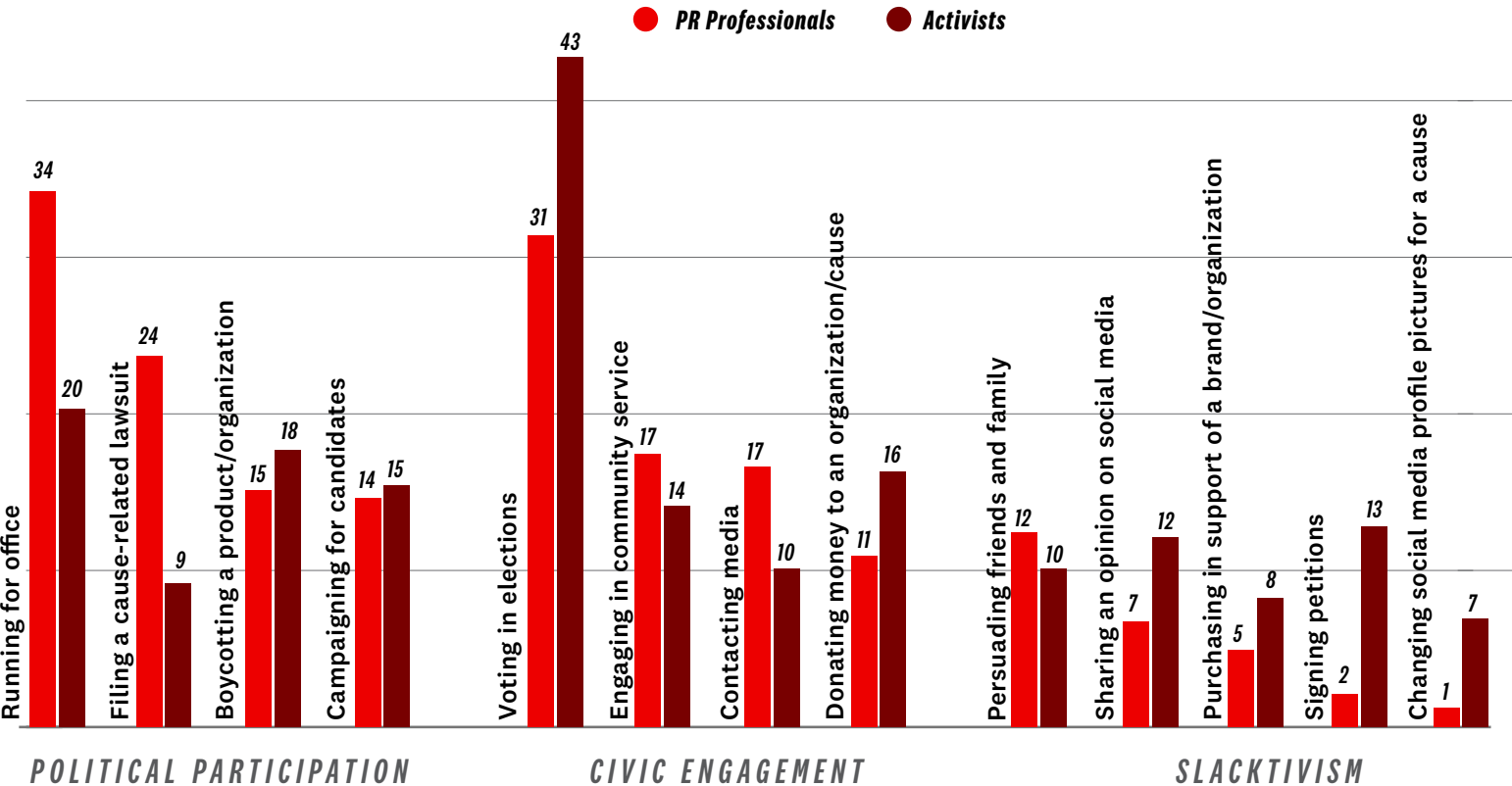
Public relations professionals believe that participation in the electoral process is the most effective way to achieve long-lasting change, followed by taking legal action. They rank tactics they associate with activism, such as protests and walkouts, as much less effective.

Interestingly, activists agree. They place an even greater emphasis on voting in elections (43%) than communicators do (31%). And it might come as a surprise to learn that few modern activists (11%) believe protesting in public is effective long-term.

Younger members of the PR community, both Gen Y and Z, select voting in elections significantly more often than older respondents. This may explain why March For Our Lives, which began as a nationwide protest for gun control, evolved into a grassroots campaign to register young people to vote. The protester of the past is being replaced by the voter of the future.



Which of the following activist tactics do you believe are the most effective in creating long-lasting change?



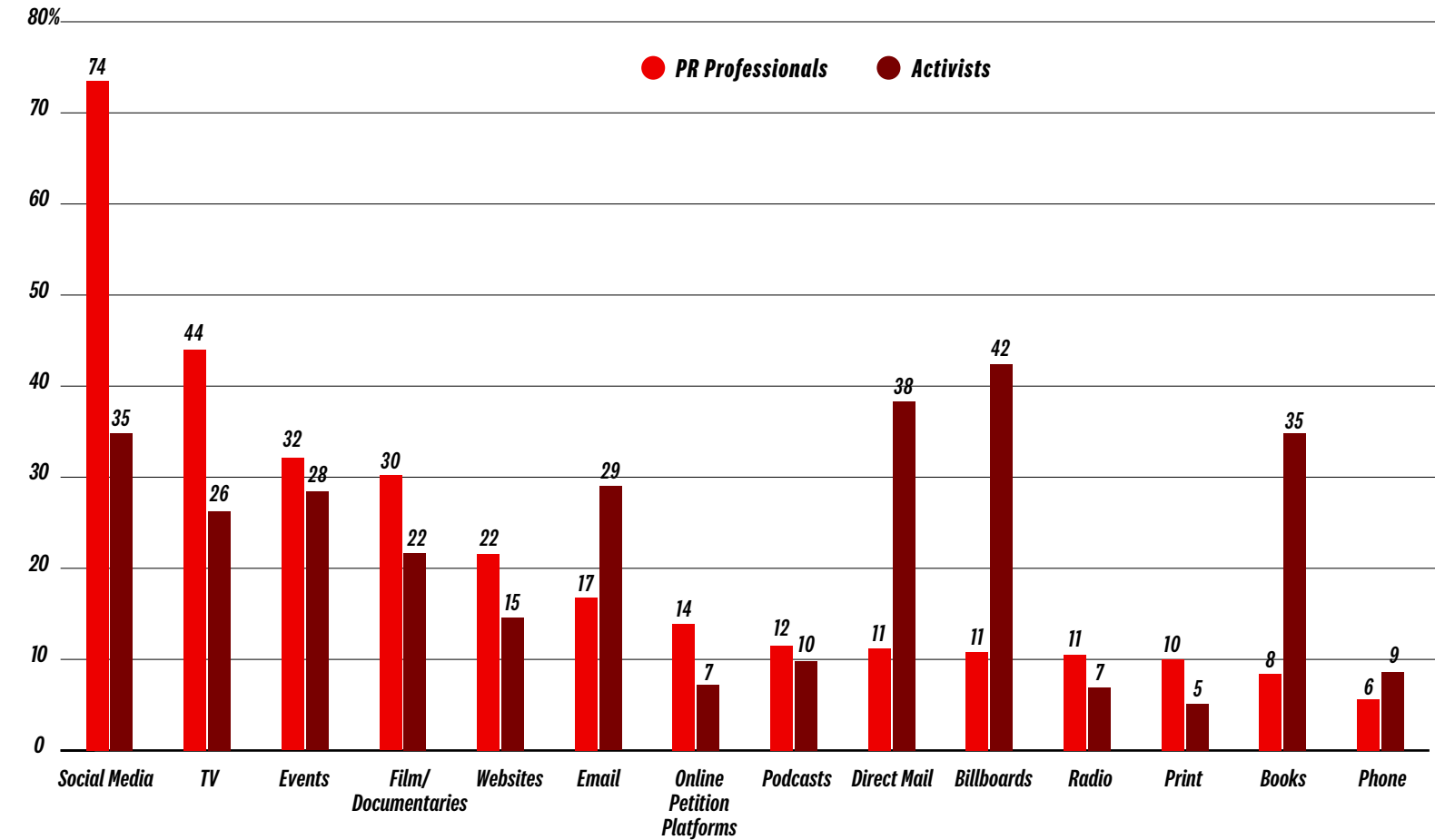


Communicators believe social media is by far the most effective tool for today's activists. The internet has shifted the power to the individual activist, who can use social media to unite like-minded people from different countries and organizations into powerful movements.

Activists also believe in the power of social media, but place equal importance on traditional vehicles, like billboards and books. Jamie Margolin, the 18-year-old founder of climate change advocacy group Zero Hour, chose to author a book titled *Youth to Power* to tell her story, and asked Greta Thunberg to write the foreword. In the era of *clicktivism*, when everyone is sharing their opinions online, more tangible tools can be more credible.

Both groups agree that television and film are still effective visual mediums for gaining attention for issues and causes, as SeaWorld experienced with the documentary film "Blackfish."

*How effective are the following communication channels for present-day activists to deliver their messages?*





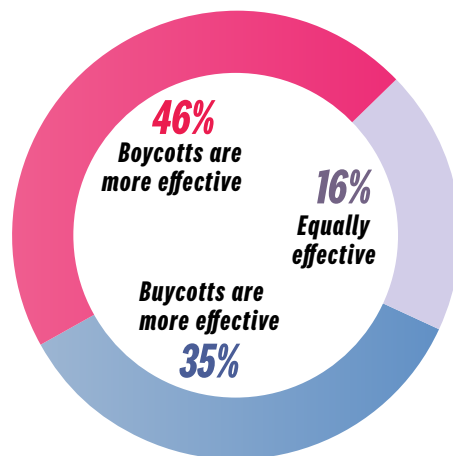
63%

Of PR Professionals believe activists are more influential today compared to *five years ago*

64%

Of PR Professionals believe activists will be more influential over the *next five years*

Are activists most effective when attacking an organization they believe is doing something wrong (boycott) or supporting an organization they believe is doing something right (buycott)?



Nearly two-thirds of those working in communication predict activism's influence will increase in the coming years. This trend is even more pronounced outside of the U.S. (74% international vs. 60% U.S.). This could pose a growing threat to companies who develop practices in opposition to the views these groups represent. But it also offers an opportunity to those who are committed to placing purpose at the center of their communications.

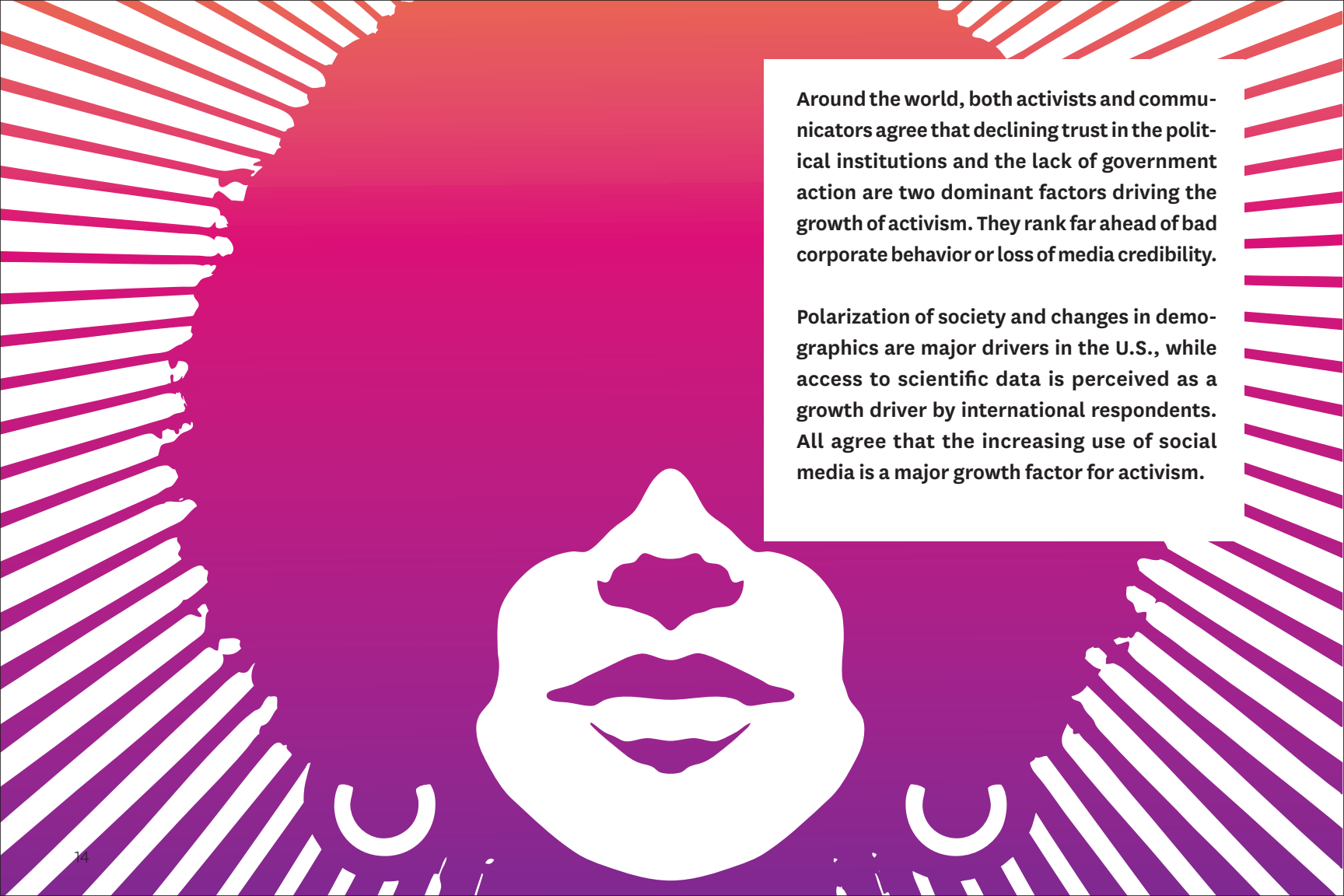
As the COVID-19 crisis taught us, future-focused PR executives must be prepared to manage unexpected events and controversial issues—well outside their comfort zones. To play this important role successfully, they will need to rely on the advice of the experts who are anxious to partner with them.



**“Stereotypes and unconscious biases that have formed over generations need to be challenged by activists who model inclusive behavior and bring diverse thinking to the table. Their actions will bring more innovative solutions and inspire future generations.”**

**DEANNE YAMAMOTO**

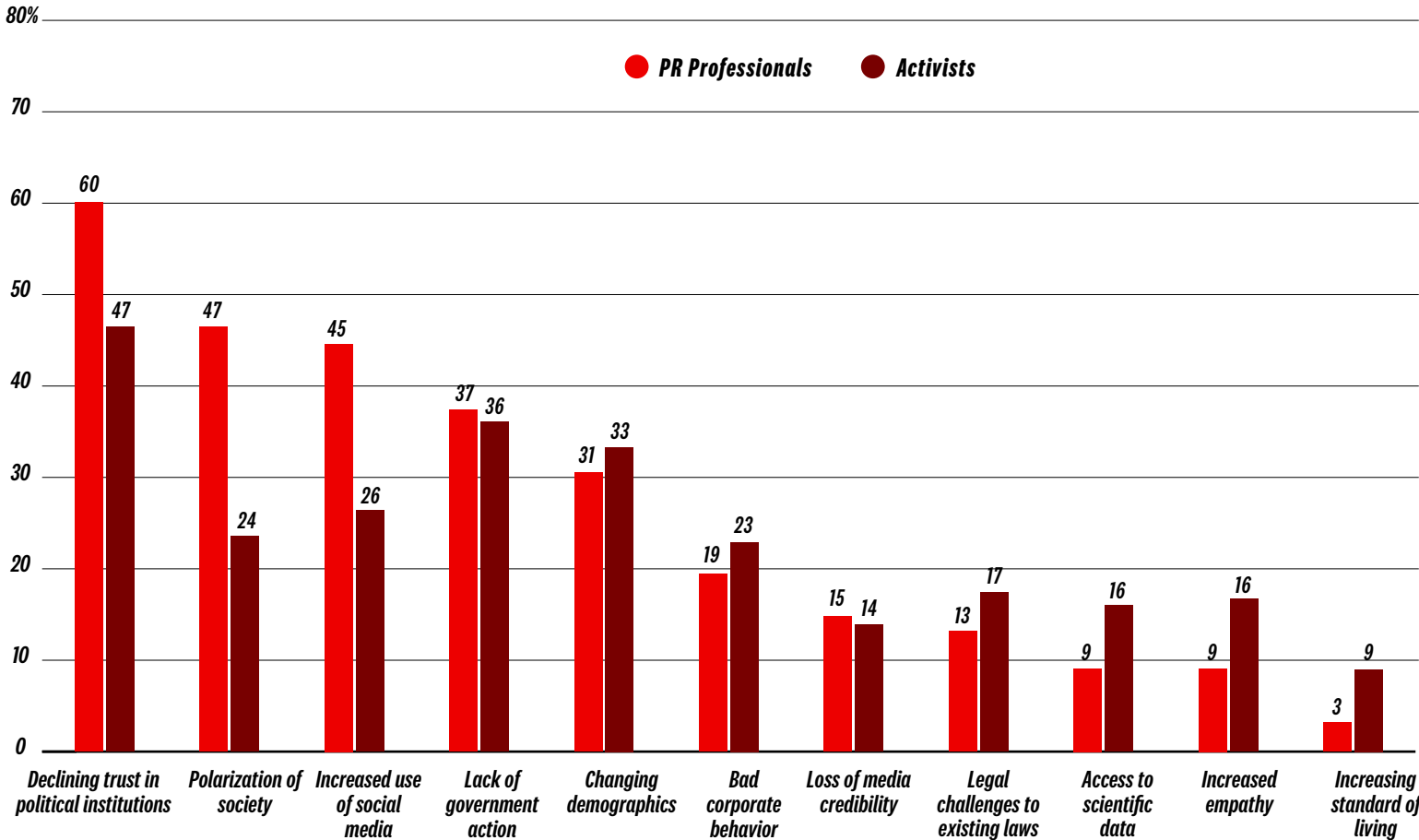
Managing Director, Golin Los Angeles  
Board Member, USC Center for Public Relations



Around the world, both activists and communicators agree that declining trust in the political institutions and the lack of government action are two dominant factors driving the growth of activism. They rank far ahead of bad corporate behavior or loss of media credibility.

Polarization of society and changes in demographics are major drivers in the U.S., while access to scientific data is perceived as a growth driver by international respondents. All agree that the increasing use of social media is a major growth factor for activism.

What are the key factors that will drive the growth of activism?



# WHO ARE THE NEW ACTIVISTS?

“Every movement in history has been in part led by young people. Adult activists have to understand the potential and unique power youth have to make change.”

JAMIE MARGOLIN

**W**ho are the activists emerging as leaders of a whole new generation and how will they act?

While communicators choose community leaders and celebrities as the activists who will be most influential in the future, they also rank average citizens above CEOs, influencers and journalists.

Activists agree the charismatic heroes of the past are being replaced by the average citizens of the present. In fact, 29% of activists agree that “everyone will be an activist” in the future.

While communicators don’t rank students and children as very significant in initiating social change, when asked to name the one individual who will have the most impact in the future, they overwhelmingly chose Greta Thunberg, a 17-year-old student from Sweden. Activists believe children will be just as influential as journalists. To quote Australian singer Tones and I, “The Kids are Coming!”

*In the future, who will be most influential in initiating social change? Ranked from most to least.*

PR Professionals		Activists	
#1	Community leaders	Average Citizens	#1
#2	Celebrities	Celebrities	#2
#3	Average Citizens	Community leaders	#3
#4	CEOs	CEOs	#4
#5	Social media influencers	Journalists	#5
#6	Journalists	Children	#6
#7	Philanthropists	Politicians	#7
#8	NGO leaders	Philanthropists	#8
#9	Politicians	Social media influencers	#9
#10	Student groups	NGO leaders	#10
#11	Children	Student groups	#11
#12	Religious leaders	Religious leaders	#12

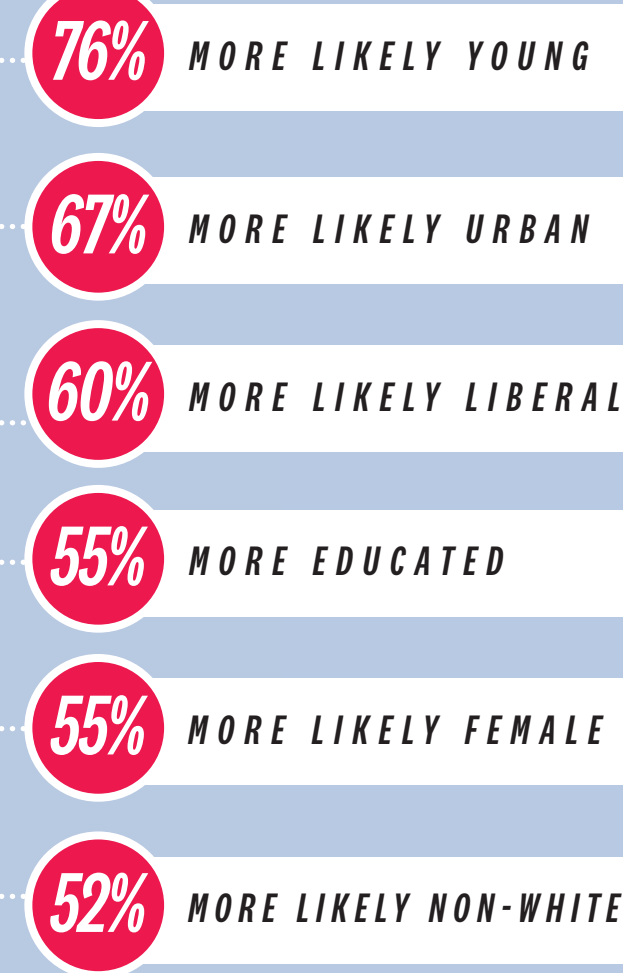
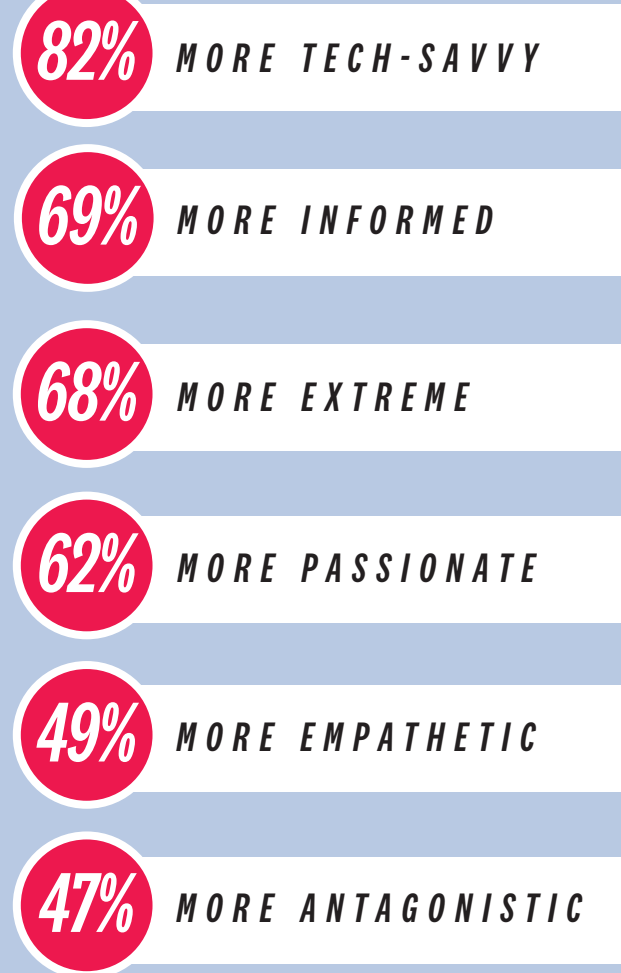
“IN THE FUTURE, EVERYONE WILL BE AN ACTIVIST”

25%  
Of PR Professionals agree

29%  
Of Activists agree

What characteristics define the New Activist? Demographically, most communicators think the majority will be younger, non-white, urban females, who are well-educated and tech-savvy. Politically, they will lean liberal. They also believe future activists will be more informed, more empathetic and more passionate—qualities that facilitate cooperation. But also more extreme and antagonistic—qualities that don't.

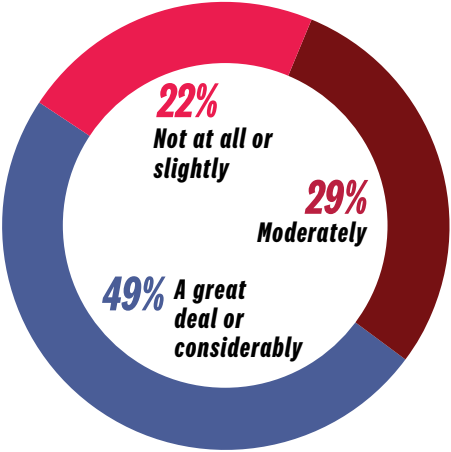
Survey results also reflect notable differences in opinions across demographic groups. More female respondents believe future activists will be female, more informed, and more collaborative. On the other hand, conservatives predict they likely will be more antagonistic and unrealistic. Right or wrong, these perceptions will influence how businesses react to the New Activists' agendas. Both groups should take a fresh look at each other and focus on the intersection of their interests.



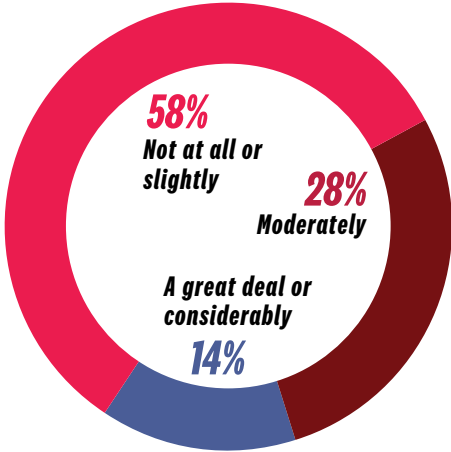
It's encouraging to see that many PR professionals are thinking about the reaction of activists when they're planning a new initiative. Given their growing influence, it's hard to believe that anyone does not.

Although communicators are considering their point of view, 58% say they rarely or never involve activist groups when they are creating a new policy. Less than 3% involve them a great deal. This seems like a missed opportunity for collaboration, which may be based on outdated perceptions of activists.

*To what extent do you consider the potential reactions from activist groups when you are planning an initiative or creating a new policy for your company or clients?*



*To what extent do you proactively involve activist groups when you are planning an initiative or creating a new policy for your company or clients?*

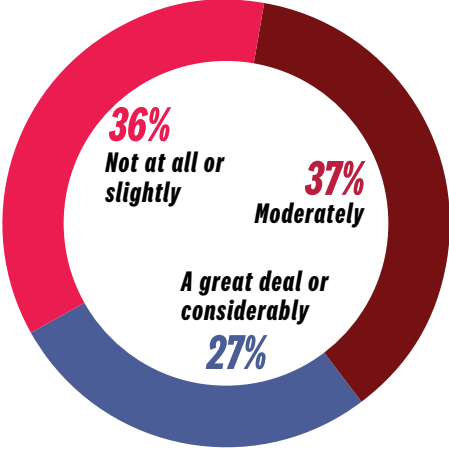


Underlining the value of cooperation, 64% of those who proactively engage with activists report their companies benefit when they do. Activists are even more bullish on working with business: More than 80% think they benefit from the relationship.

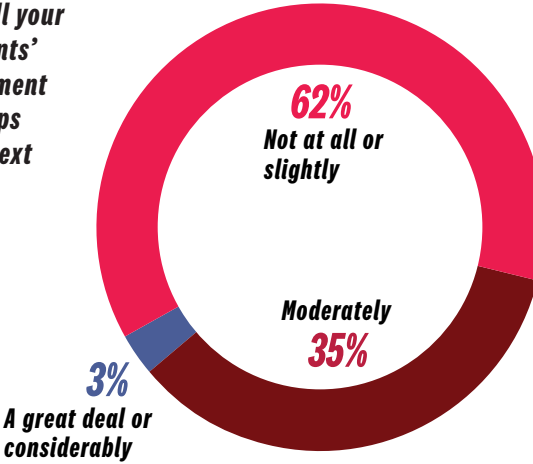
Looking into the future, many corporate communicators—especially those who practice outside of the U.S.—predict they will work more closely with them. If these two powerful forces can combine to find new solutions, it will be good news for everyone.

However, the level of collaboration will vary depending upon the nature of the activist group. The World Wildlife Foundation and March for Climate top the list of potential partners, followed by the Humane Society and Amnesty International. However, “none of these” was selected by more PR people than the ACLU, Black Lives Matter, Times Up or PETA. Almost no one said they are willing to partner with National Right to Life, Anonymous or the NRA. Looking forward, thoughtful companies will seek activist partners that align with their values and their business.

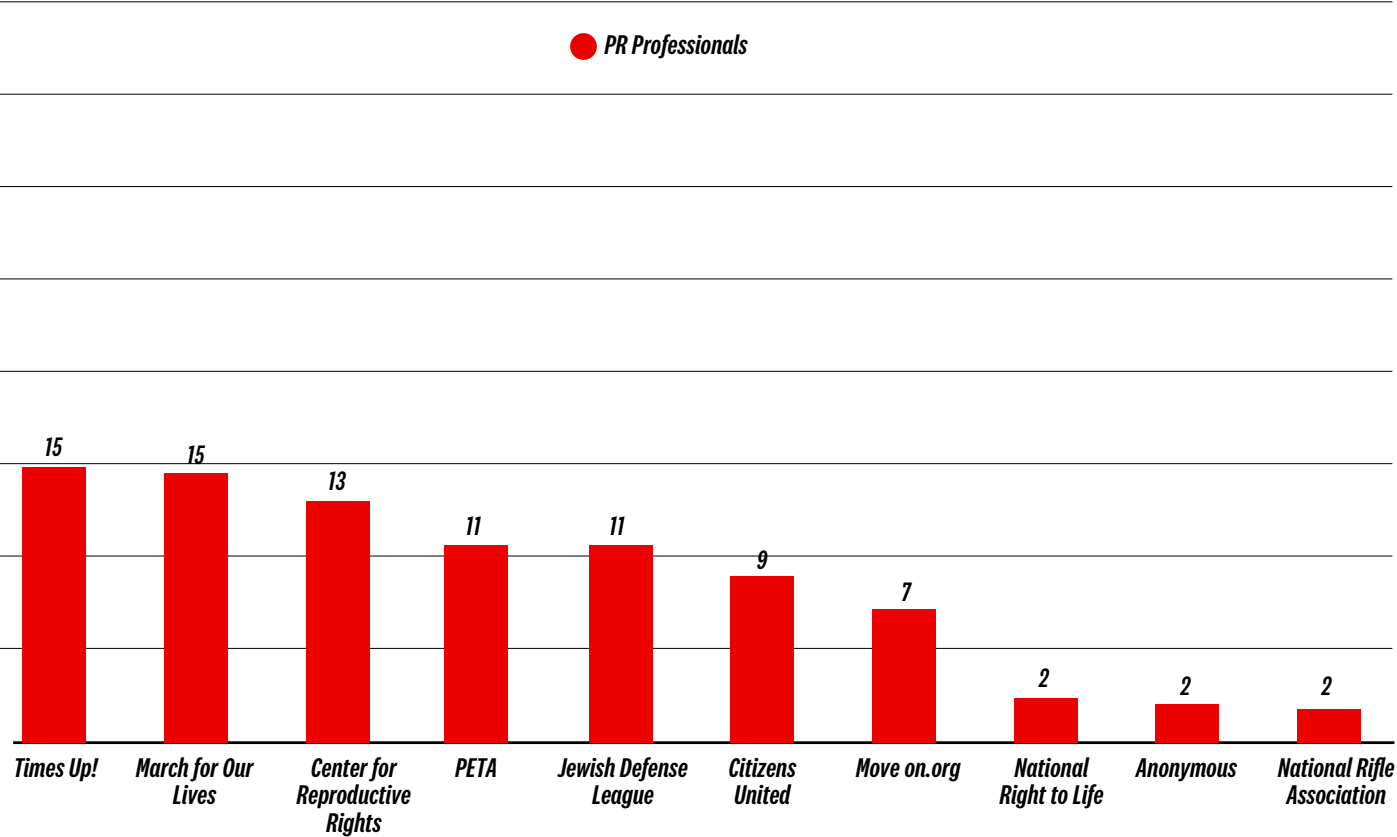
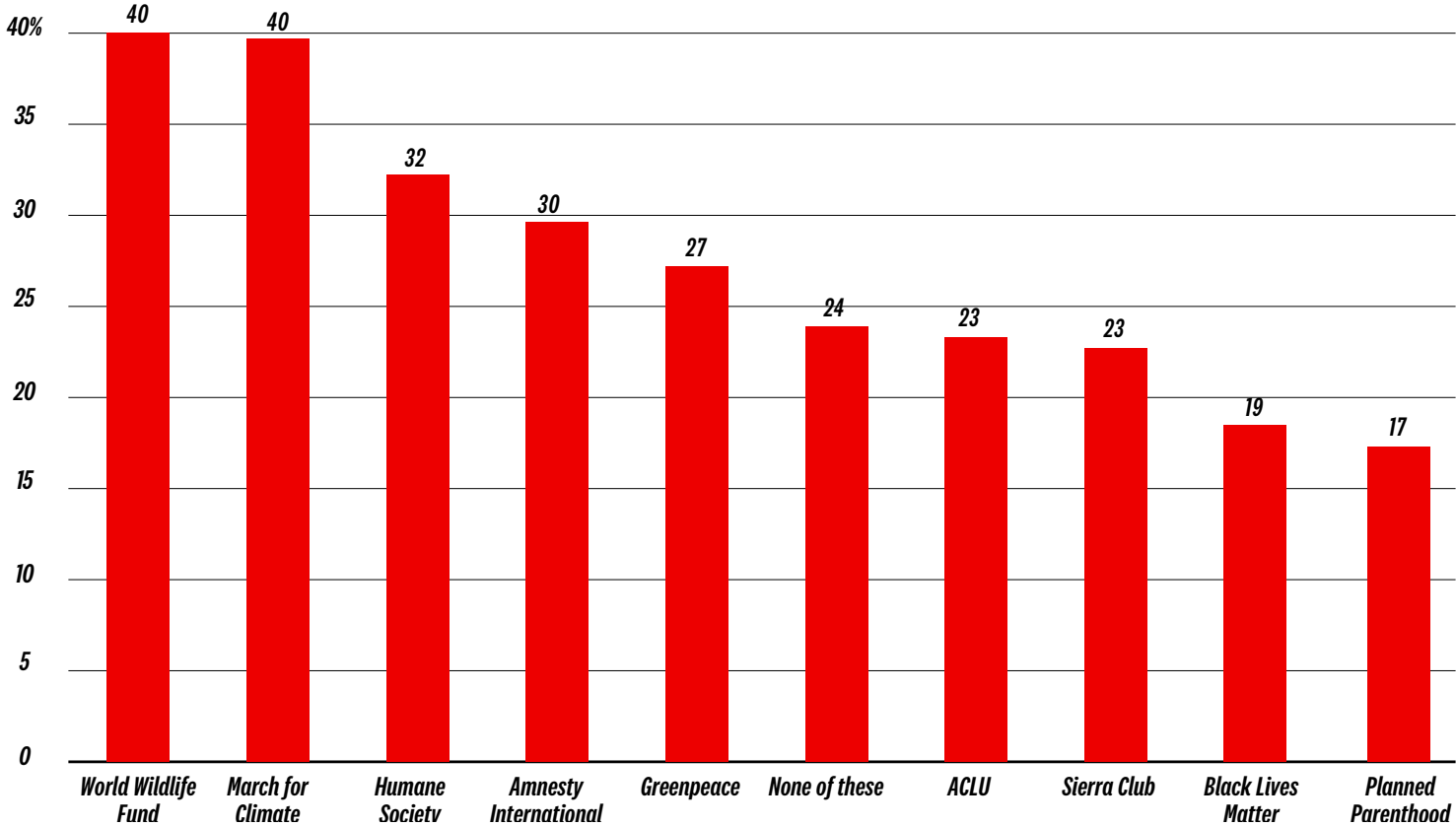
*To what extent does your company or clients benefit from proactively engaging with activist groups?*



*To what extent will your company's or clients' proactive engagement with activist groups change over the next five years?*

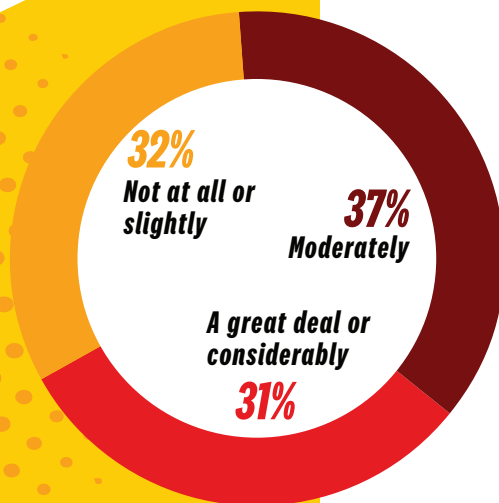


*If any, which of the following activist groups would your company or clients be willing to partner with?*





*How prepared are your company or clients to respond to attacks from activist organizations?*

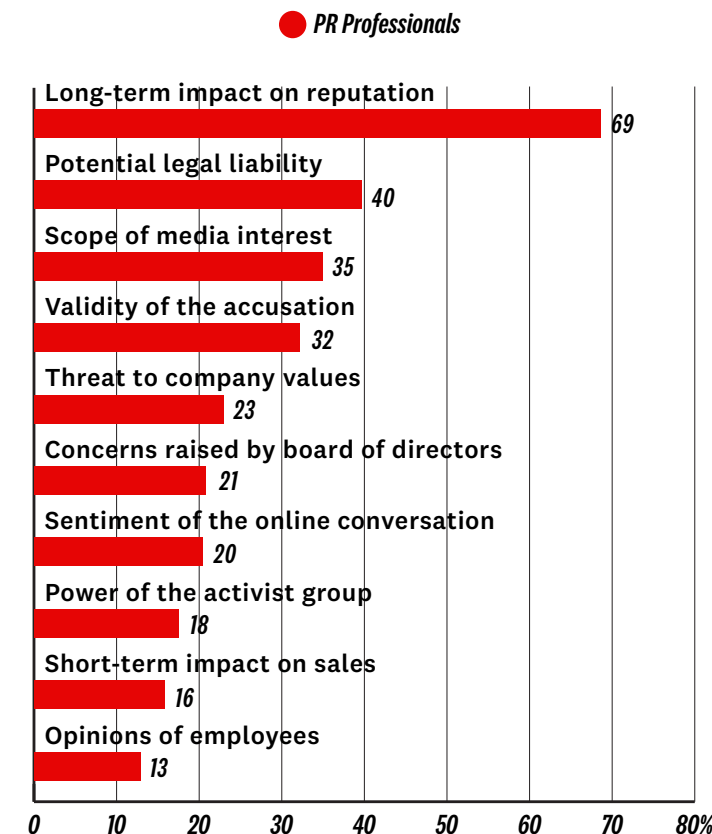


Looking at the less cooperative side of activist relationships, it's surprising that only 31% of professionals surveyed believe their organization is very prepared to respond to activist attacks when they happen. The question is whether the unpreparedness stems from a lack of attention to activists or a lack of skills.

The primary rationale for responding to an activist attack is based on the potential impact on a company's or a brand's long-term reputation, which is cited four times more often than the impact on short-term sales. Legal liability and media interest are also important factors in triggering a corporate response.

In the age of employee activism, it's stunning that communicators say the opinions of their employees is the last factor they consider when deciding how and when to respond to activists. This attitude will surely evolve as more employees voice their opinions on everything from gender equity to climate change.

*What factors most likely trigger your company or clients to respond to attacks from activist groups?*





## NEW ACTIVISM REQUIRES NEW COMMUNICATION

Overall, only one-fourth of PR professionals describe themselves as *Activists*. Most plan to express their beliefs in more traditional ways, like voting, donating money and engaging in community service. They aren't likely to engage in more vocal methods, like protesting and striking. Almost three-fourths identify as *Allies*, people who support activists. Females are significantly more likely to describe themselves as both *Activists* and *Allies*, while younger respondents are more likely to participate in protests, strikes and walkouts.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO PR PROFESSIONALS  
AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

*I think of myself as an  
activist*

**24%**  
*Agree*

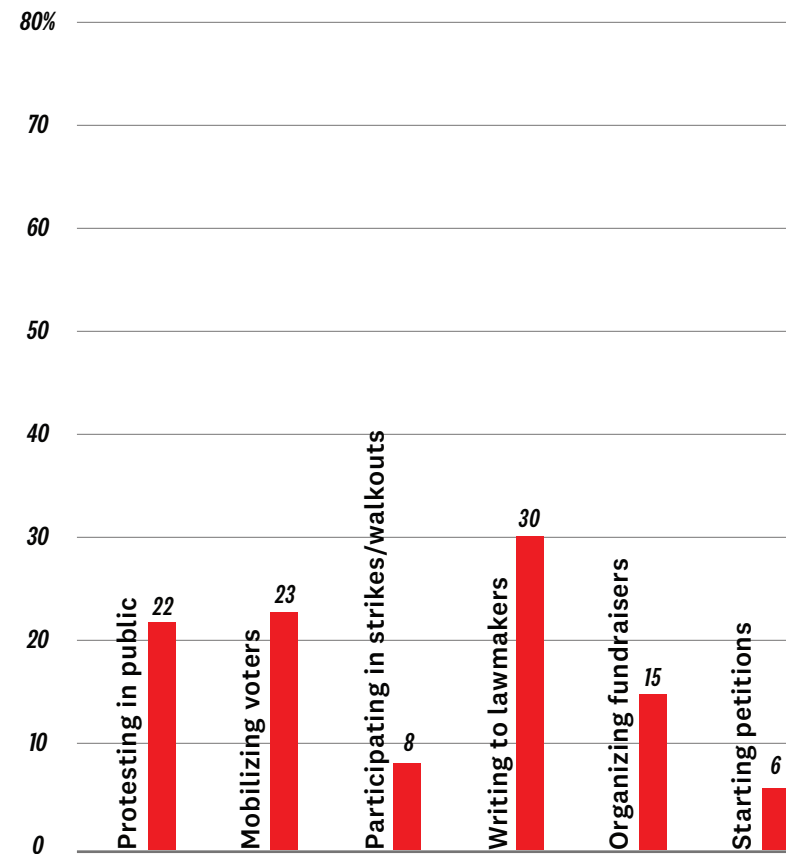
*I think of myself  
as an ally\**

**70%**  
*Agree*

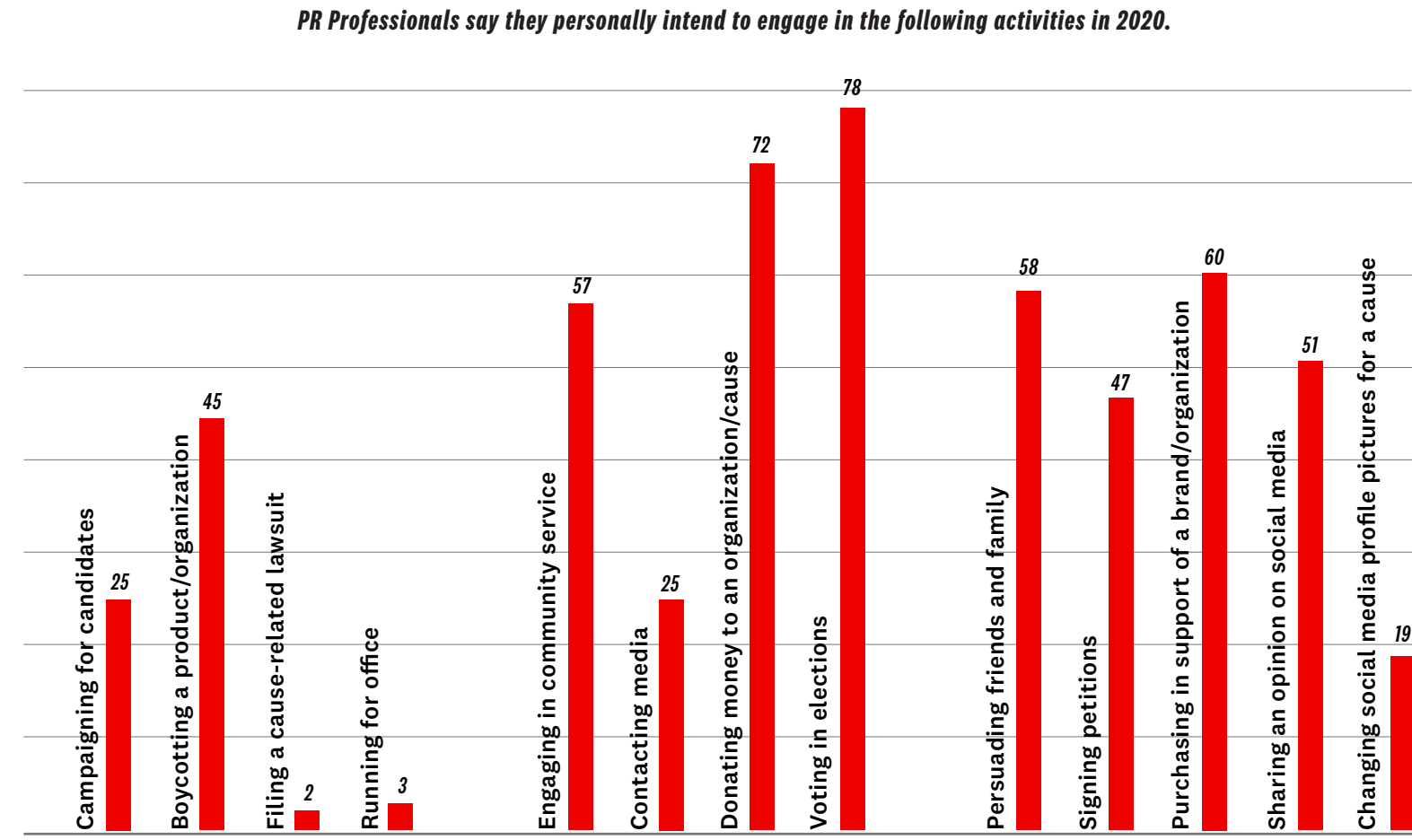
*\*Someone who supports activists*







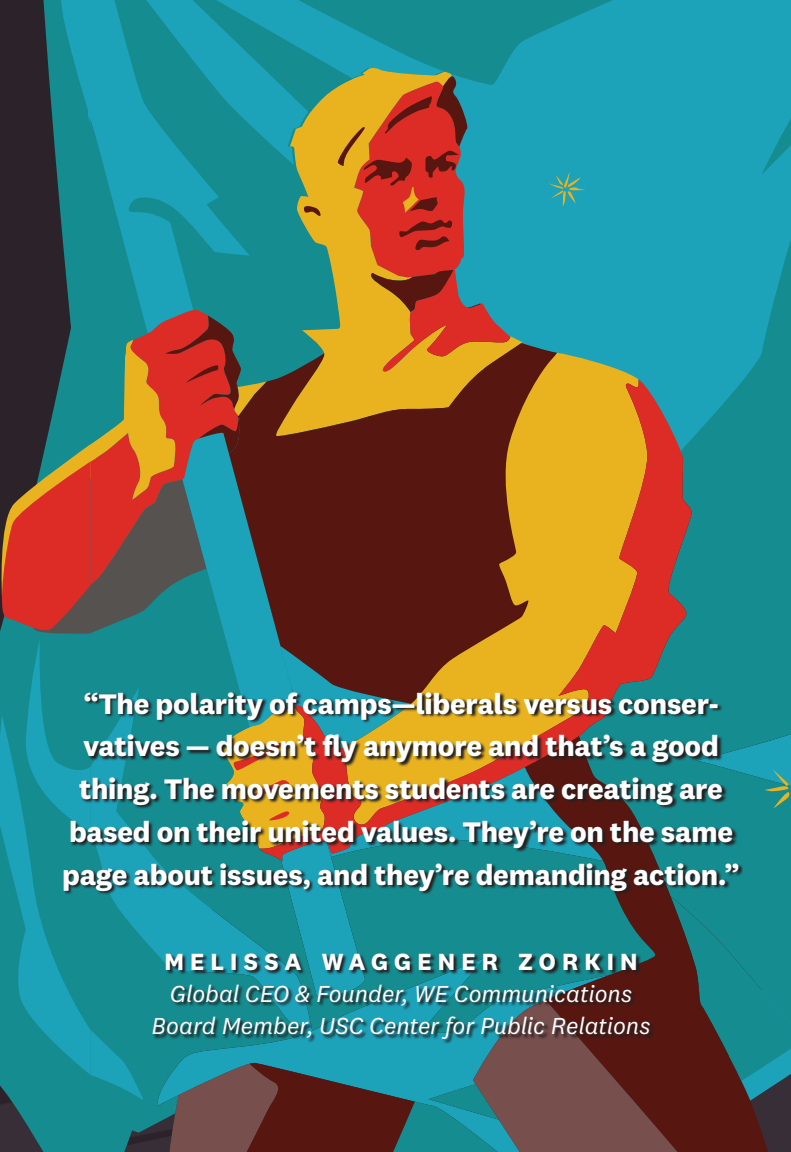
*PUBLIC ACTION*



*POLITICAL PARTICIPATION*

*CIVIC ENGAGEMENT*

*SLACKTIVISM*



“The polarity of camps—liberals versus conservatives — doesn’t fly anymore and that’s a good thing. The movements students are creating are based on their united values. They’re on the same page about issues, and they’re demanding action.”

**MELISSA WAGGENER ZORKIN**  
Global CEO & Founder, WE Communications  
Board Member, USC Center for Public Relations

Even though most don’t identify as activists, an overwhelming majority (84%) of PR professionals believe a corporation should take a public stand on issues related to their business. Diversity & inclusion is the number one issue U.S. communicators will tackle, while climate change is the overwhelming concern outside the U.S.

But communicators are much less enthusiastic about speaking publicly about issues like LGBTQ rights, gun control and immigration.

Almost half of students studying public relations believe that companies should take a stand on issues—even if unrelated to their business. These future leaders are more eager to expand the role of business in society.

*According to Public Relations Professionals...*

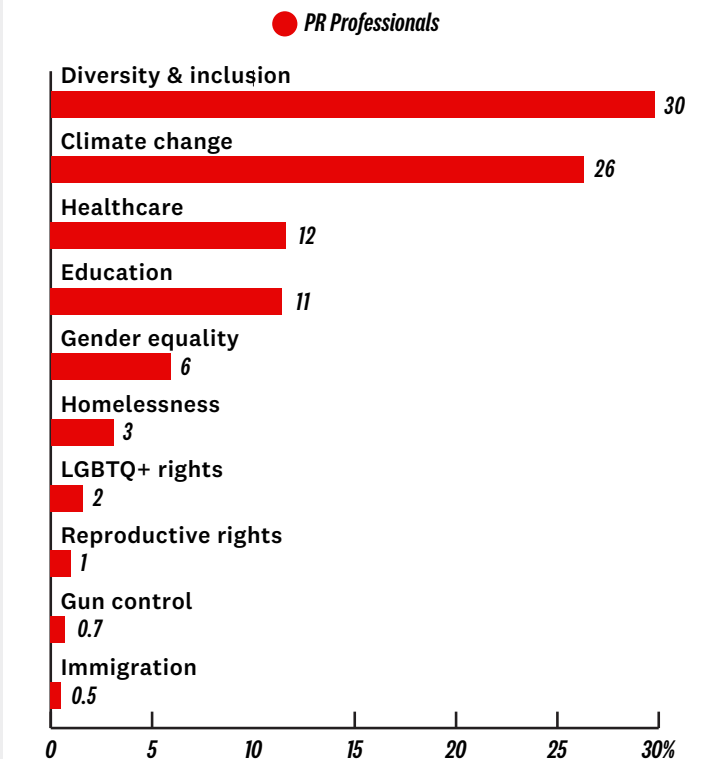
*CORPORATIONS SHOULD TAKE A PUBLIC STAND ON SOCIETAL ISSUES RELATED TO THEIR BUSINESS.*

**84%**  
*Agree*

*CORPORATIONS SHOULD TAKE A PUBLIC STAND ON SOCIETAL ISSUES UNRELATED TO THEIR BUSINESS.*

**28%**  
*Agree*

*On what societal issue will your company or clients most likely proactively take a public stand in the future?*



“Storytelling and relatability to a movement are the first steps in effective digital organizing, both of which can be amplified through social media. Young activists today are showing us that success does not come from having a platform, but rather from creating one.”

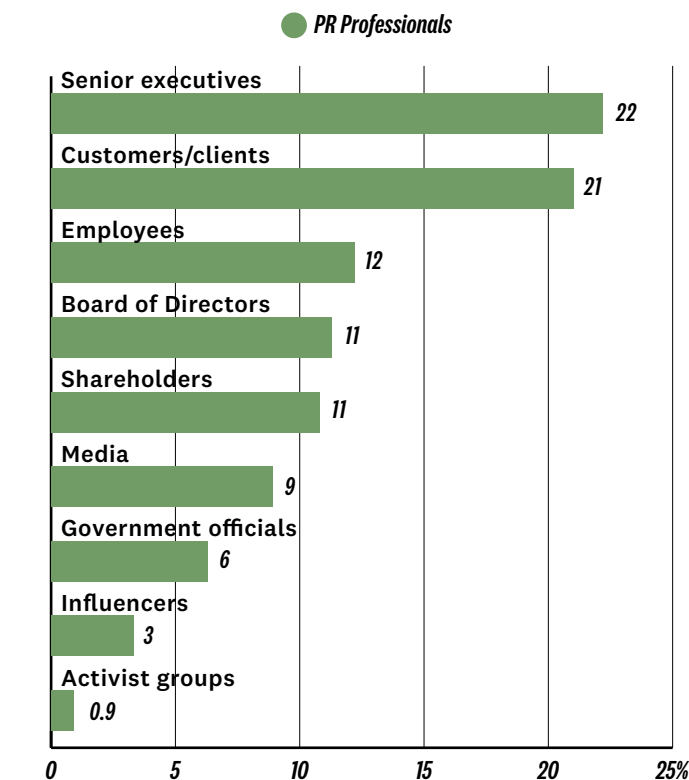
BRENDAN DUFF

The decision on what social issues companies address is influenced mainly by the views of their senior executives and their customers. They are much more important than government officials and activist groups—who seem to have little influence on the formulation of corporate policy.

If activists want to be engaged in the corporate decision-making process, they need to demonstrate how their involvement can help build a company’s reputation—rather than tearing it down.

In this critical formulation stage, companies are more interested in their employees’ opinions. Speaking up at the beginning of the process is much more effective than complaining at the end.

**Which stakeholder group is the most influential when your company or clients formulate positions on social issues?**



**“Companies that collaborate with activists can gain important perspective on how to use brand influence to elicit meaningful societal change. With the rise of the younger conscious consumer, organizations that take a stand have an increasing competitive advantage.”**

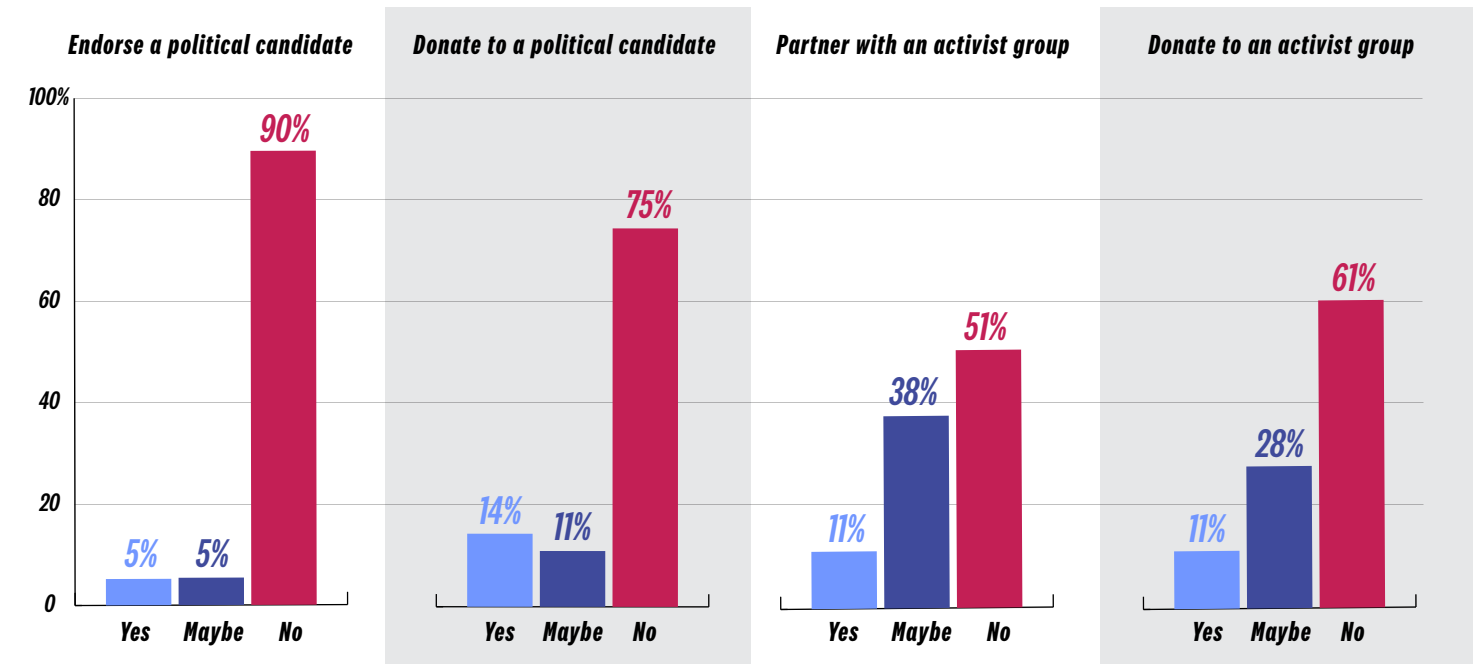
**ELIZABETH LUKE**

*Communications Executive, Pinterest  
Board Member, USC Center for Public Relations*

In 2020, most communicators say their companies and clients will not endorse or donate to a political candidate. Similarly, more than half say they won't donate or partner with activist groups in the coming year.

Recent studies show that consumers and employees expect companies and brands to get involved. And we have seen the positive results of their involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the future, will this new level of corporate mobilization and cooperation be applied to other high-stakes global issues, like climate change?

## IN 2020, YOUR COMPANY WILL...

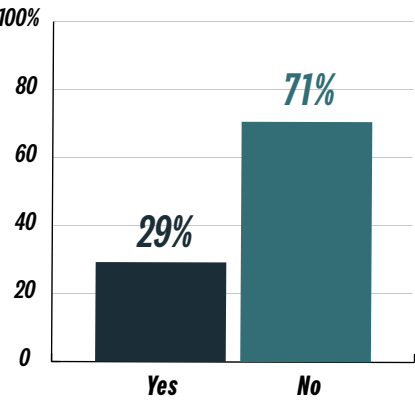




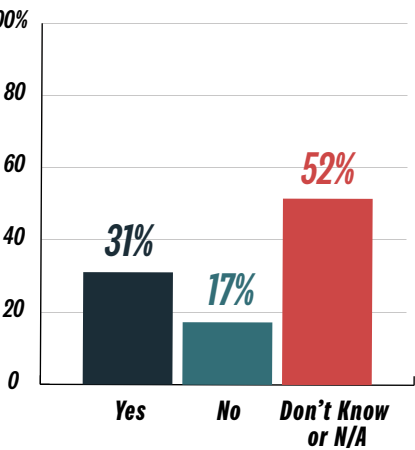
Given employees' growing engagement in all kinds of issues, it is striking that less than one-third of communicators say their organizations have policies regarding employee activism. And half say they don't know if their organizations support employee involvement in activist groups. As the NBA learned when the Houston Rockets' general manager recently commented on the Hong Kong protests, stating a personal opinion can become an international incident. In the era of New Activism, creating a policy about how employees publicly address divisive societal issues should be mandatory to avoid embarrassment and reputational damage.

DOES YOUR COMPANY...

Have a policy regarding employee activism?



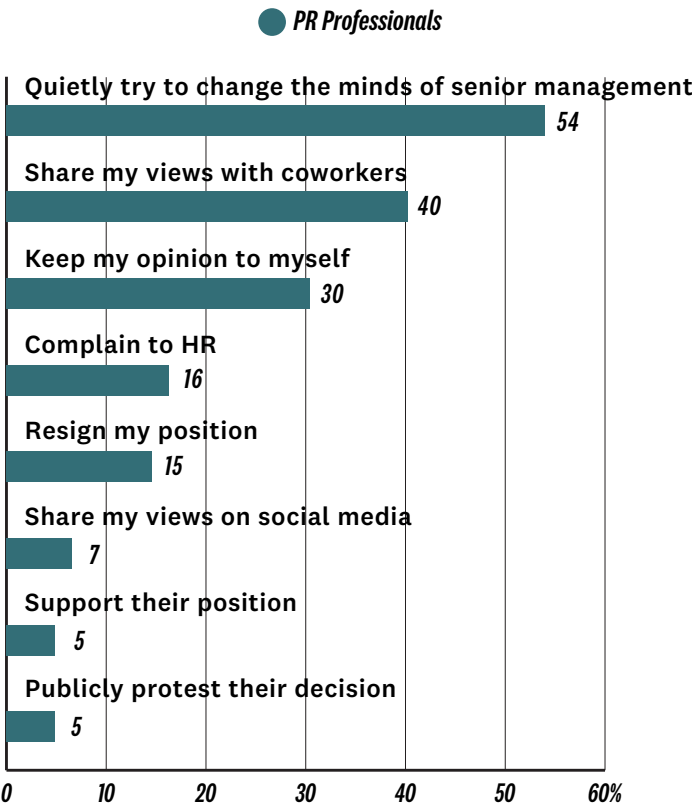
Support employees' involvement in activist groups?



When they disagree with a stand their companies take on an important cause or candidate, most communicators are unlikely to protest or complain. The majority, especially men, say they will quietly try to change the minds of senior management or they will share their opinions with their coworkers. Almost one-third say they will just keep their opinions to themselves.

The traditional role of public relations executives is to defend the reputations of their companies and their clients. Sometimes this work is done behind the scenes without the benefit of outside perspective. In a future filled with passionate, informed activists, communicators will need to take a proactive approach to addressing sensitive social causes and engaging the everyday citizens who promote them. New Activism requires New PR.

If your company took a public stand that you disagree with on an important social issue or political candidate, how would you respond?



## METHODOLOGY

The data for the 2020 Global Communications Report was collected through an online survey fielded by the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (CPR) and distributed through PR-related email lists and social media groups. The survey was live between January 21, 2020, and February 24, 2020.

The survey asked questions regarding activist groups, their impact and their relevance for PR aimed at PR professionals (agency and in-house professionals) and PR students. Responses were subjected to extensive data cleaning to eliminate dubious response patterns and respondents who had misclassified themselves.

The sample for this survey is a “convenience sample.” Consequently, we cannot say that the responses are representative of the respective populations. Nevertheless, we believe this data offers numerous directional insights into the attitudes and beliefs of the PR community.

### DESCRIPTION OF PR PROFESSIONAL SAMPLE:

The sample included in the analyses encompasses 837 responses from PR professionals, of which 503 were PR professionals working in agency/consultancy establishments and 334 working as in-house PR professionals. 72% of the PR professionals were from the United States and the remaining 28% from other countries.

Of those working for agencies/consultancies, 35.2% indicated that they headed the organization and 20.5% had significant management responsibilities within the organization. Of the in-house PR professionals, 41.3% indicated that they were the most senior communication professional in the organization and an additional 24.9% indicated that they had significant management responsibilities.

The PR professionals in the sample were mostly between 45-54 years old (27.5%), followed by 35-44

years (23.3%). 39.3% indicated that they were male, 58.8% female and 1.9% other or preferred not to answer. Nearly half (49.7%) had 20 years or more of working experience in the PR industry. Regarding their political orientation, 56.8% identified as liberal, 25.4% as center and 17.8% as conservative.

### DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT SAMPLE:

The student sample encompasses 195 respondents. The student respondents were 20.5% male, 76.8% female and 2.7% identified as other or preferred not to answer. 78.1% were between 18-24 years old and 17.9% between 25-34 years. 90% were from the United States. 64.7% were undergraduate or honors students. 64.2% identified as liberal, 19.7% as center and 16.1% as conservative on the political spectrum. 59.9% had work experience in the PR industry. Given their extensive experience working in PR, students were combined with the PR professional sample to represent the PR

community when comparisons across generations were made.

### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVIST SAMPLE:

The activist sample encompasses 296 U.S. respondents who were polled online through Survey Monkey on March 14-15, 2020. The respondents were qualified based on the PR professionals’ definition of activists in our initial survey: whether they engaged in public action or political participation. The respondents were 49.3% male and 50.7% female. 42.9% were between 18-29 years old and 29.7% between 30-44 years.



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Fred Cook, Director  
Burghardt Tenderich, PhD,  
Associate Director  
Ron Antonette  
Ulrike Gretzel, PhD  
Tina Vennegaard

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Chief Program Officer  
ron.antonette@usc.edu  
213-740-3864

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## COMING SOON



Join Fred Cook, USC Annenberg professors and PR industry guests for further discussions about New Activism and other topics in a new #PRFuture podcast series premiering this May. Our initial episodes will feature activists Brendan Duff (March For Our Lives), Jamie Margolin (Zero Hour), and April Reign (#OscarsSoWhite).

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