

# THE NEW NORMAL

**WHAT A CHANGING  
CULTURE MEANS  
FOR THE FUTURE  
OF BUSINESS**

8th Annual Business & Politics Study, 2021



## INTRODUCTION

A CHANGING CULTURE

FOR THE PEOPLE

RISK + REWARD

ACTION ≠ ACTIVIST

# THIS YEAR DOESN'T JUST FEEL DIFFERENT, IT IS DIFFERENT.

For nearly a decade, we have been tracking Americans' expectations of the companies they work for and do business with. Each year, we have seen an increased demand for corporate engagement, for companies to speak out, take action, and drive change. This year, with the confluence of a global pandemic, calls for racial justice, and a battle for the presidency, corporations felt compelled to stand up and make their voices heard and Americans are responding to their leadership. This has cemented a new normal. And there is no turning back.

Corporations are becoming a means of checks and balances. Companies are being called to lead and play their part in ensuring that these social movements become more than just moments. Ultimately, employees, customers, legislators, and shareholders will judge companies not just by what they say, but by how they act and whether their impact is real. There will be consequences for those that don't rise to the challenge; for those that do, the reward will be great.

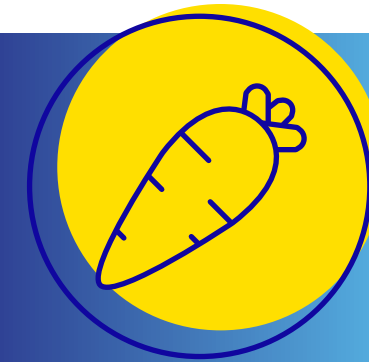
## IN THIS YEAR'S REPORT



4



7



10



14

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# WHAT IT MEANS

## THE NEW BUSINESS IMPERATIVE

### **Take the lead.**

Companies have shown us they can take quick action. Now they must continue to speak out and stand up for what is right.

### **Build a more perfect union.**

Americans want a new kind of unity. Corporations must work with politicians – and vice versa – to do what’s best for the country.

### **Meet *many* moments.**

It is not just about the major moments. Companies must be engaged in sustained, ongoing efforts to make their commitment clear.

### **Talk the talk, walk the walk.**

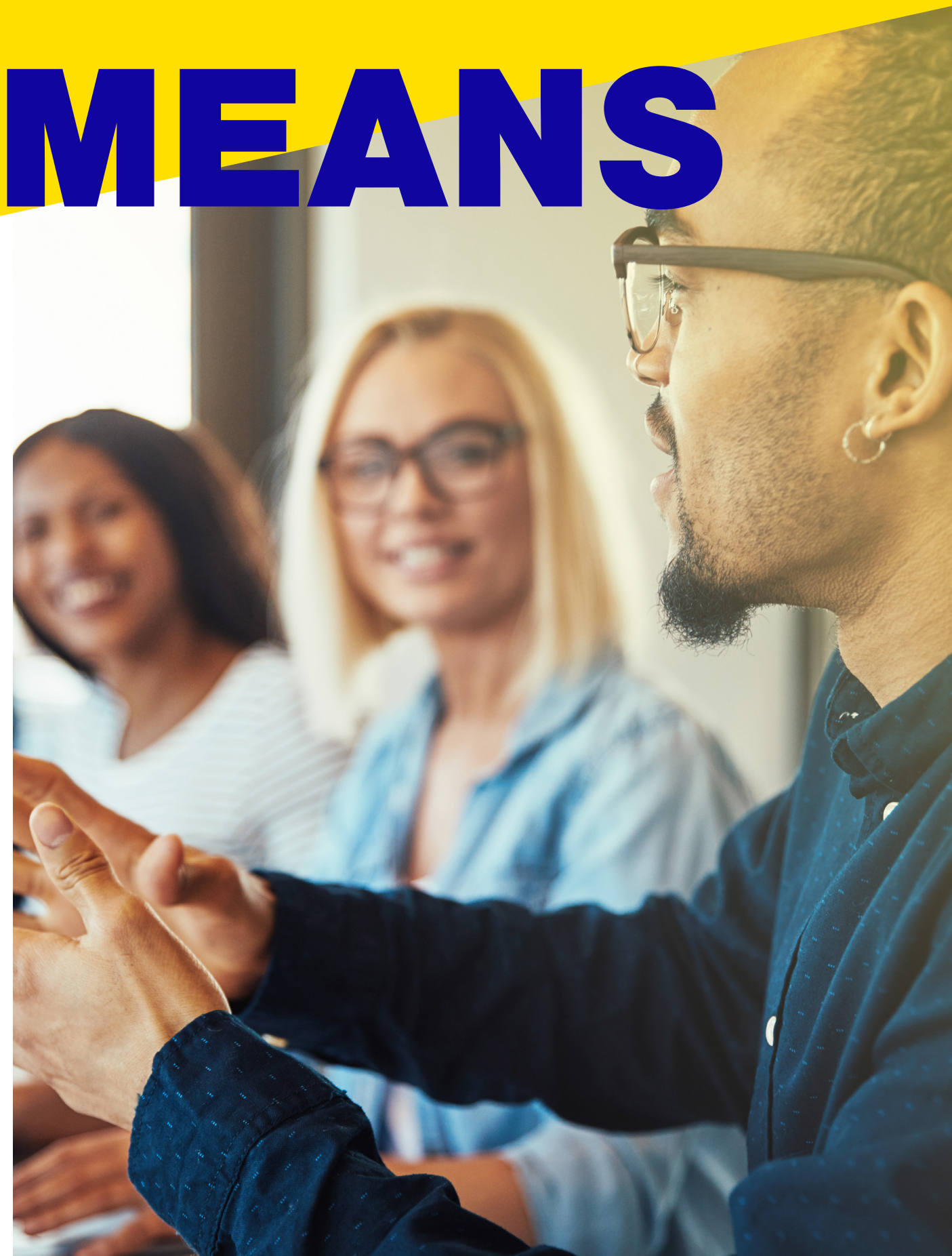
Words matter, but actions matter more.

### **Lead from the top.**

While many employees approve of the way their companies handled the big moments of 2021, too few heard directly from the top. CEOs must take a more active role in setting the tone for their organizations.

### **It is about action, not activism.**

For corporations, wading in to social and political waters can feel dangerous. But Americans aren’t necessarily looking for corporate “activists.” They want companies who are “forward-thinking” and “open-minded” to lead the way on the issues that matter most.



# A CHANGING CULTURE

## Companies acted, and Americans took note.

Americans have become conditioned for change. They have seen companies rise to the challenge time and time again. Companies pivoting to manufacture emergency PPE. Public companies restructuring their Board membership to reflect more diversity. Investment banks and Fortune 500 companies halting political donations.

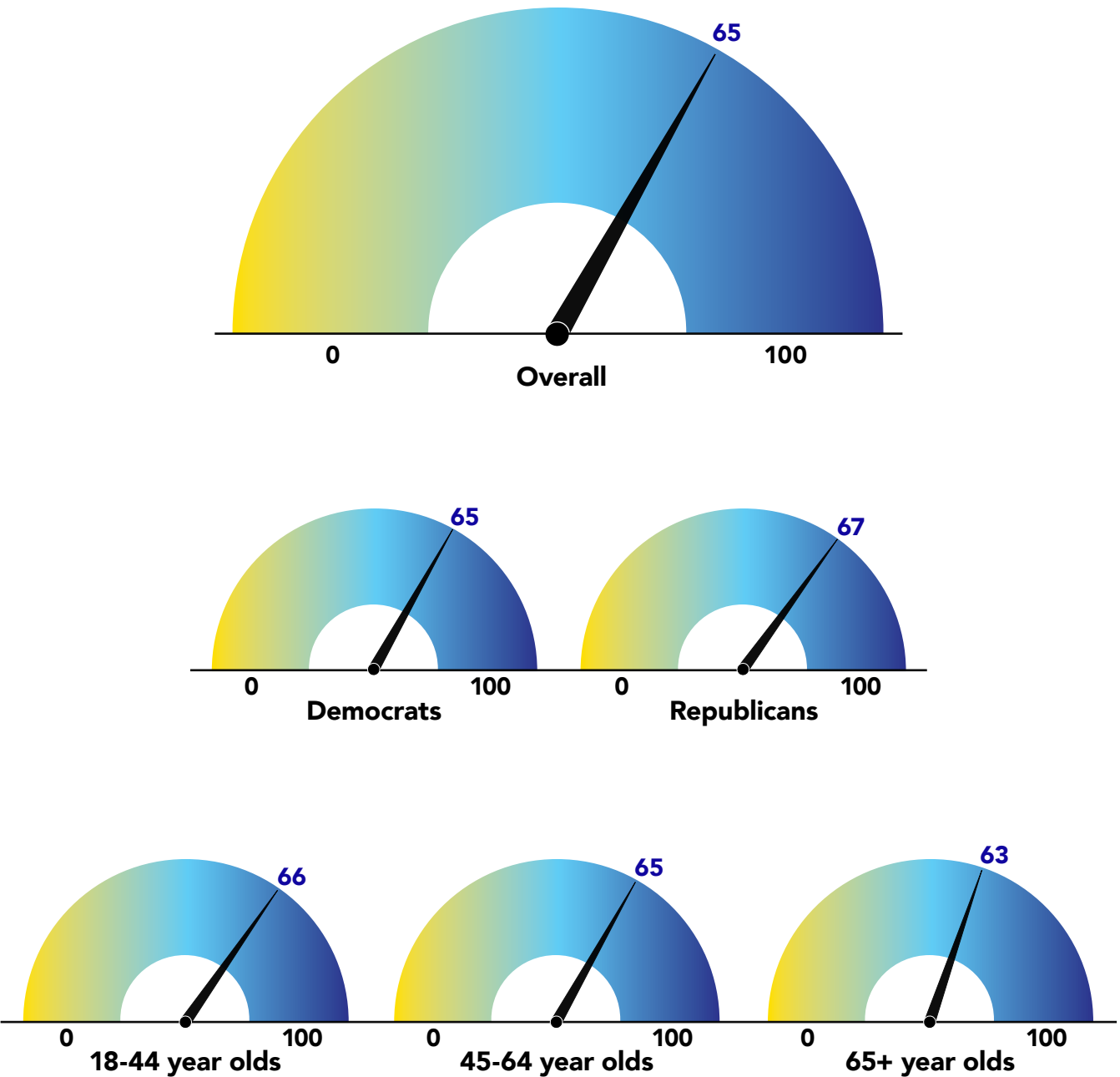
The bar has been raised. Americans have seen companies push for change, and now they know companies can create change.



# WE SEE YOU

Americans recognize that companies have become more active when it comes to social and political issues.

Think back to the past year or two. Please indicate whether you have noticed a change in how companies generally behave when it comes to social and political issues.



Americans have increasingly sought out information about positions companies take on social and political issues.

% who actively seek out information	
Change since 2016	+11
Democrats	+18
Republicans	+7
18 - 44 year olds	+16
45 - 64 year olds	+6
65+ year olds	+11

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## IT'S A MOMENT, AND A MOVEMENT

Which of the following do you think has been the strongest motivator for the change in behavior for companies?

Specific major events, like a mass shooting, the killing of George Floyd, the coronavirus pandemic, etc.

26

A change in our culture in which Americans have begun taking a company's position on issues into account when making purchasing decisions

20

A sense of responsibility and feeling like they should do the right thing

12

Pressure from consumers

11

Nothing is getting done in government to create change

10

A change in leadership at the company

6

Pressure from shareholders

6

Pressure from employees

5



**Democrats are more likely to say change is driven by major events (37%), while Republicans are more likely to say it is driven by a change in our culture (25%).**

# FOR THE PEOPLE

## Leadership and partnership go hand in hand.

After moments that seemed to favor partisanship ahead of purpose, Americans across the political spectrum are calling out for a new kind of unity. It is an opportunity to rise above the lingering divisions and rancor. Our corporations must work with government – and our government must do the same. This is the call to action, not just for America’s largest corporations, but for the many small businesses in communities across the country.



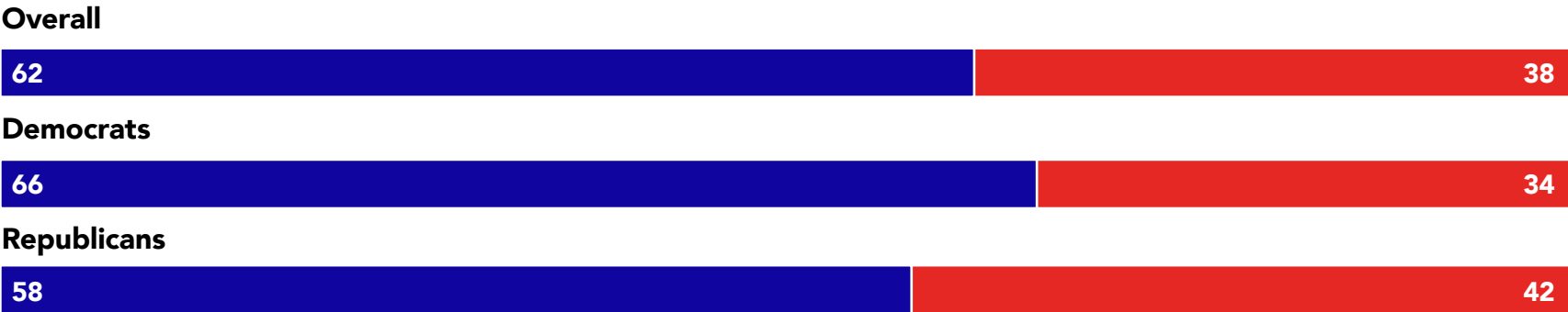
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# A WINNING COMBINATION

When it comes to addressing social and political issues, what role do you think corporations should take?

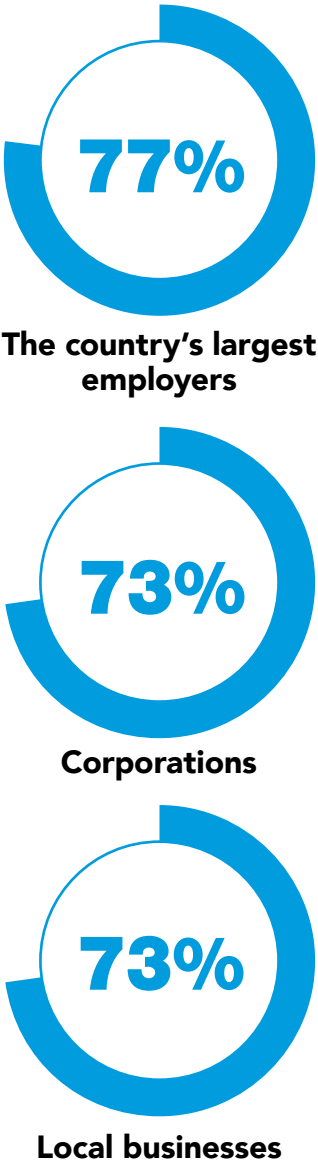
Corporations should act as leaders who cooperate with elected officials

Corporations should act as followers who listen to elected officials before taking a position or action



74% of Americans think companies have a responsibility and an opportunity to be leaders and changemakers in the midst of partisan gridlock.

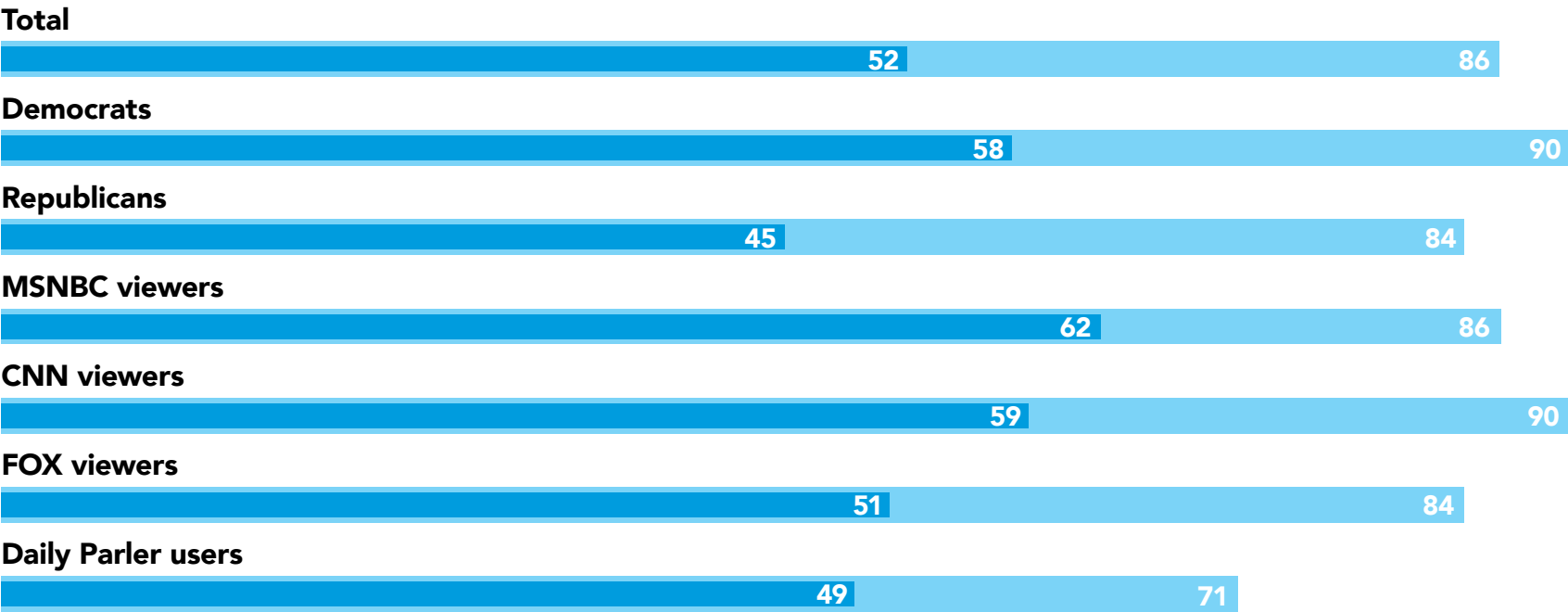
Please indicate how much of a responsibility you think each has to bring about social change on important issues facing society.



# FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Corporations and politicians need to work together to do what’s best for the American people.

Strongly agree Agree



## New Administration Met With Optimism

Do you expect the Biden administration to...

Work **with** companies to solve the country’s most important issues



65

Work **against** companies to solve the country’s most important issues



35



# RISK + REWARD

## Sustained engagement has lasting rewards.

Companies are routinely rewarded by consumers and by employees for their actions in important moments. This year we saw reputational spikes for companies that were showing up in meaningful ways on the pandemic, on issues of racial justice and around civic engagement. Employees gave credit to employers who meaningfully engaged on these issues too.

But what is easily gained is just as easily lost. As many companies returned to business as usual, consumers and employees were still looking for leadership on these issues.



# SEEING IS BELIEVING

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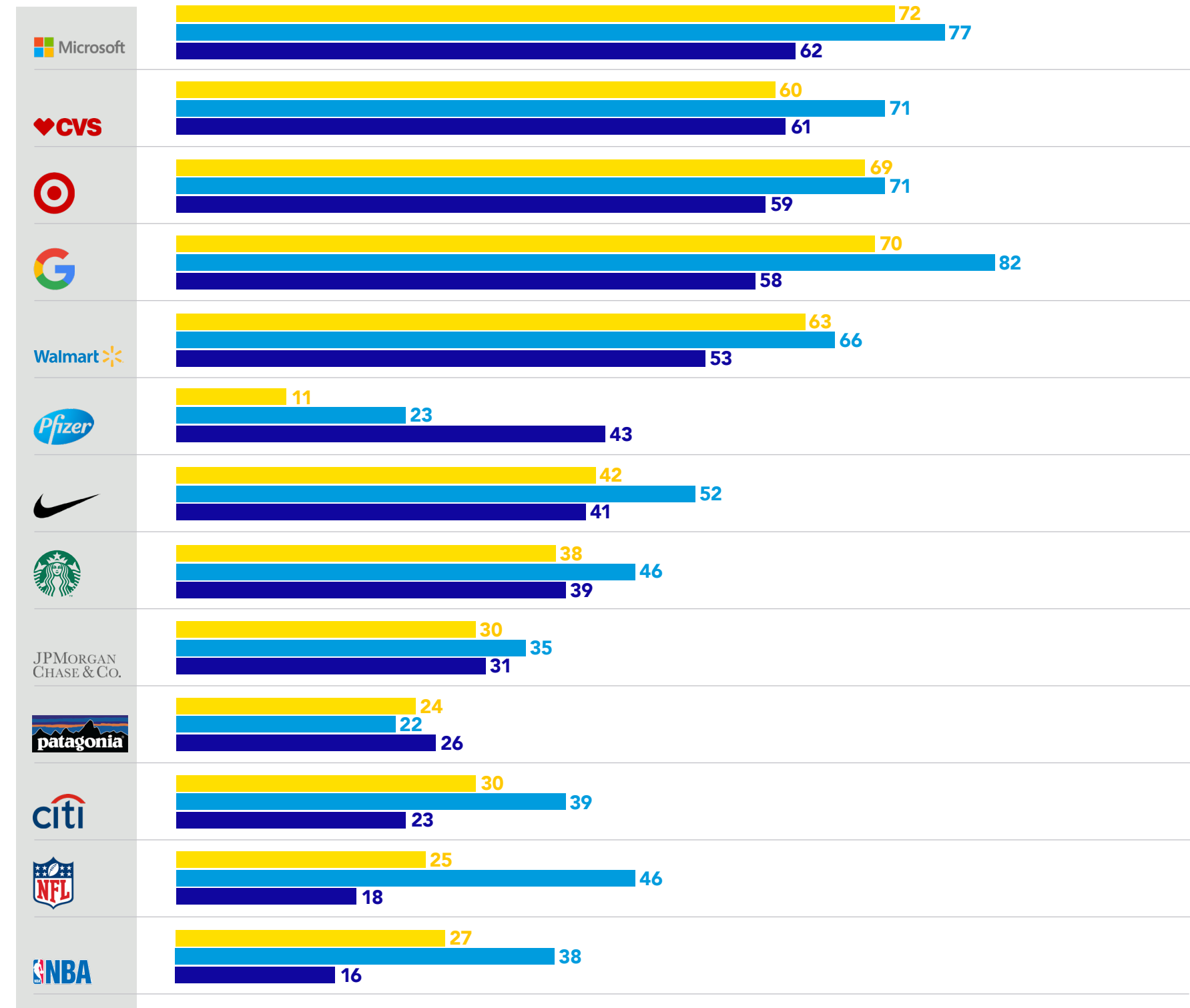
## RISK + REWARD

## ACTION ≠ ACTIVIST



Please indicate if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of each company.

■ Net Fav Dec 2019 ■ Net Fav Mar 2020 ■ Net Fav Dec 2020



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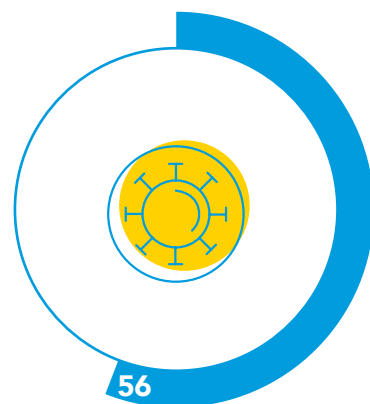
## FOR THE PEOPLE

## RISK + REWARD

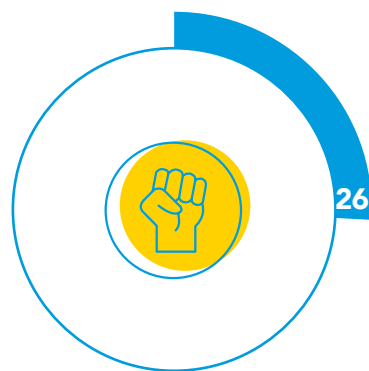
## ACTION ≠ ACTIVIST

## THE INTERNAL REWARD

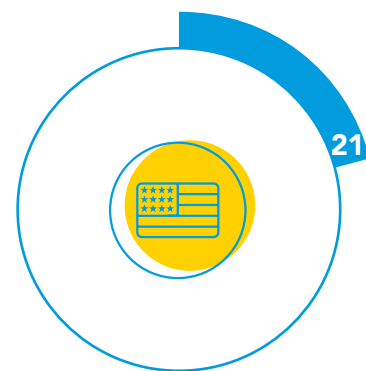
Did your employer speak out on any of the following events?



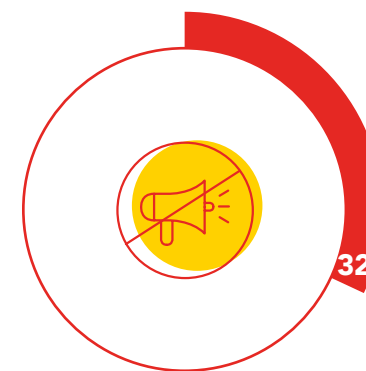
The coronavirus pandemic



The Black Lives Matter protests for racial justice



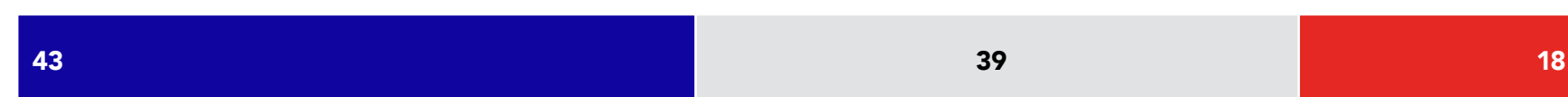
The presidential election



Did not speak out on any of these issues

Would you describe your employer as proactive or reactive when it comes to responding to social and political issues?

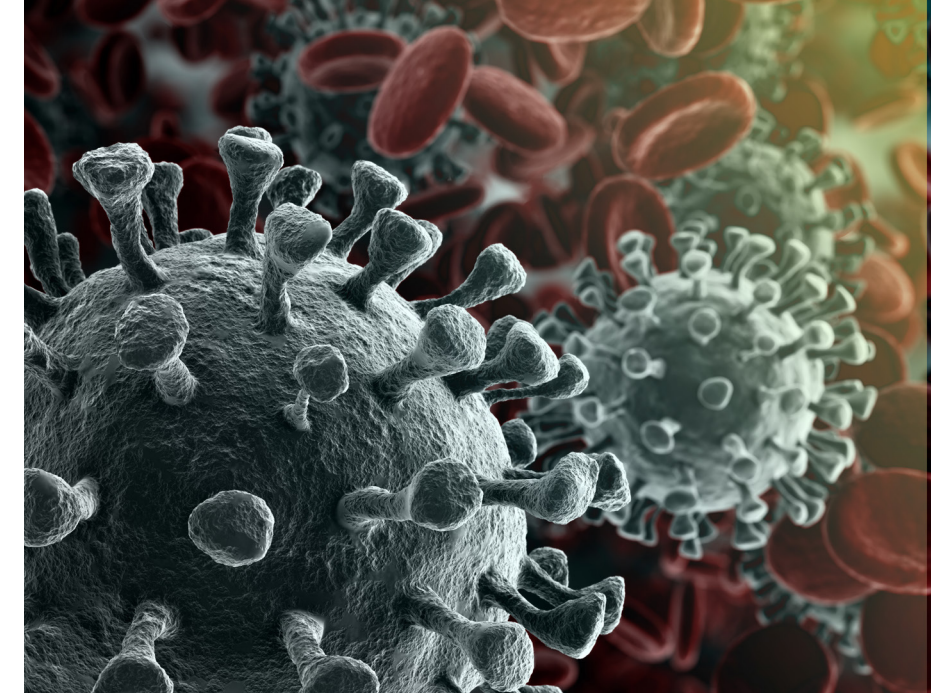
Proactive



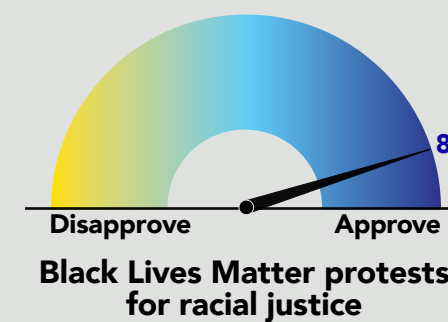
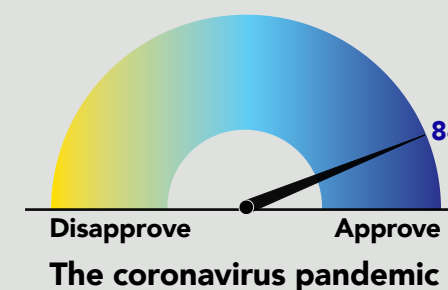
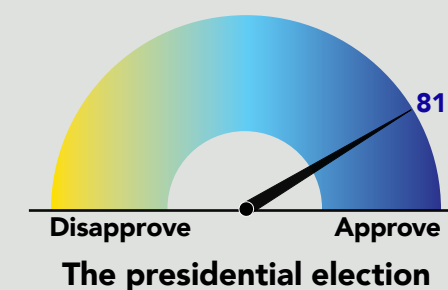
Neither

Reactive

Employees that work at HQ (53%) are more likely than non-HQ employees (36%) to say their employers are proactive when it comes to responding to social and political issues.



Do you approve or disapprove of the way your employer has handled responding to:



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# THE TIME FOR RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP IS NOW

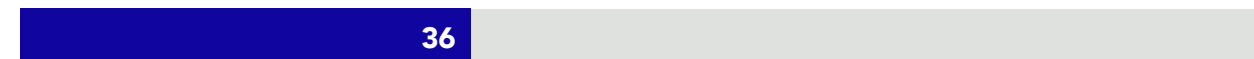
**72% say CEOs have a responsibility to bring about social change, but only 1/3 have actually heard from their CEO on social and political issues.**

Which of the following people or groups within your employer did you receive communication from?

Your manager



The CEO



Human resources



A fellow colleague



**White collar workers (46%) are more likely than blue collar workers (29%) or service workers (19%) to hear from their CEO, while blue collar workers (62%) and service workers (56%) are more likely than white collar workers (43%) to hear from their manager.**

Please indicate how important it is for CEOs to possess these attributes.

% Extremely important

■ Overall ■ Democrats ■ Republicans

**Responsive,** listens to consumers, stakeholders, and employees



**Problem-solving,** works to solve the country's top issues



**Uniting,** works to build unity across communities



**Inspiring,** makes decisions one looks up to



**Community-oriented,** supports the local community



**Leader,** makes the company a public-facing leader on social and political issues



**Collaborative,** engages other companies and organizations



**Decisive,** takes swift action on social and political issues



**Cautious,** keeps the company out of political and social issues



# ACTION ≠ ACTIVIST

**A call for forward-thinking,  
open-minded companies.**

More than just a business imperative, corporations have a moral responsibility to take action that drives sustainable, measurable, and lasting change. It is what Americans want and what they will demand from businesses moving forward. But so often companies confuse action with activism. Activism is not necessarily what Americans demand. Americans do not require companies to be agitators, rabble rousers, or even “activists.” What they do want is companies that are “forward- thinking” and “open-minded.”



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# LESS TALK, MORE ACTION

Please indicate if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

■ Agree ■ Disagree

Companies' public actions should reflect their internal values and policies.



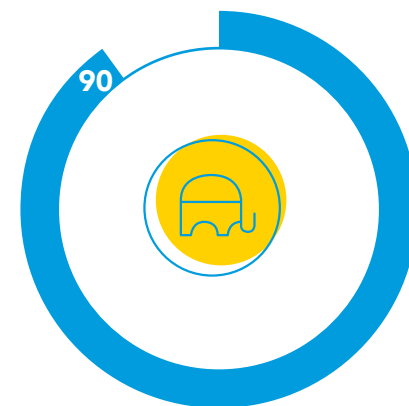
A company's internal policies should reflect what they say they care about in public.



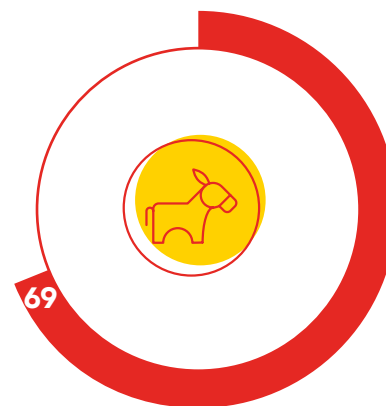
It's not enough for companies to make a statement. They need to take action to show they actually care about creating change on the issues that matter most.



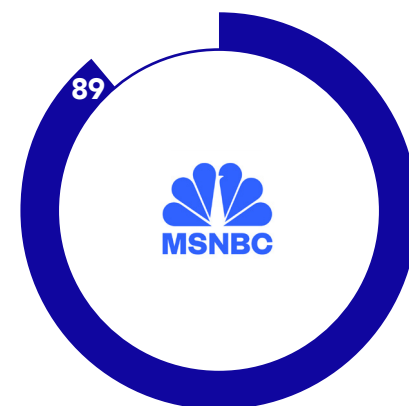
**A majority of both Democrats and Republicans agree that statements aren't enough.**



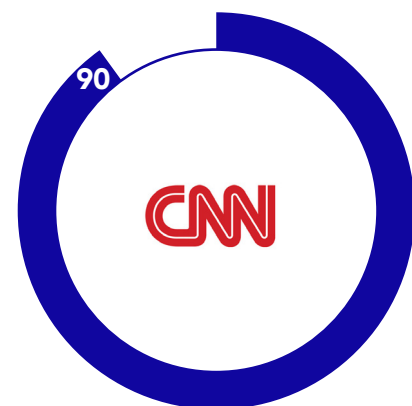
Democrats



Republicans



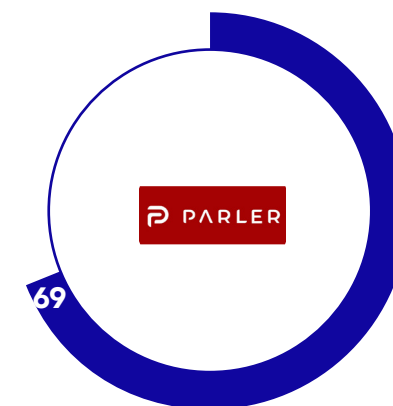
MSNBC viewers



CNN viewers



FOX viewers



Parler users



Americans want the companies they work for and do business with to be open-minded and actionable.

Words that best and least describe Americans’ ideal company to work for.

Overall	Democrats	Republicans
Top three	Top three	Top three
FORWARD-THINKING	FORWARD-THINKING	INNOVATIVE
INNOVATIVE	SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE	STRONG LEADER
STRONG LEADER	STRONG LEADER	PRACTICAL
Bottom three	Bottom three	Bottom three
LIBERAL	ACTIVIST	LIBERAL
ACTIVIST	CONSERVATIVE	ACTIVIST
POLITICALLY ENGAGED	POLITICALLY ENGAGED	POLITICALLY ENGAGED

Words that best and least describe Americans’ ideal company to buy products and/or services from.

Overall	Democrats	Republicans
Top three	Top three	Top three
FORWARD-THINKING	SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE	INNOVATIVE
INNOVATIVE	FORWARD-THINKING	PRACTICAL
SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE	ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS	COST-CONSCIOUS
Bottom three	Bottom three	Bottom three
ACTIVIST	ACTIVIST	ACTIVIST
POLITICALLY ENGAGED	RISK-TAKER	RISK-TAKER
LIBERAL	CONSERVATIVE	LIBERAL

Words that best and least describe the tone Americans would like company actions to take when it comes to speaking out on social and political issues.

Overall	Democrats	Republicans
Top three	Top three	Top three
OPEN-MINDED	OPEN-MINDED	OPEN-MINDED
COOPERATIVE	INCLUSIVE	COOPERATIVE
INCLUSIVE	COOPERATIVE	POLITE
Bottom three	Bottom three	Bottom three
HARD-LINE	HARD-LINE	HARD-LINE
COMMANDING	SOOTHING	COMMANDING
AUTHORITATIVE	COMMANDING	AUTHORITATIVE



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## ABOUT THE STUDY

**Now in its eighth year, Global Strategy Group's Business & Politics Study has become the authoritative voice on the role that companies play in the political and social discourse and how this impacts brand perception. The study has been cited by leading media outlets, including The Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review, The New York Times, USA Today, Money, Business Insider, CNBC, CBS News, Axios, and Politico, among others.**

GSG conducted a public opinion survey among 800 U.S. adults between December 17th and 20th, 2020. The survey was conducted online, recruiting respondents from a leading opt-in panel vendor. Special care was taken by GSG to ensure the demographic composition of our sample matched that of the adult population on a series of demographic variables including age, gender, region, ethnicity, income, educational attainment, partisan affiliation, and political ideology. This study may be downloaded at [globalstrategygroup.com](https://globalstrategygroup.com).

**For more information please contact:**

**Julie Hootkin**

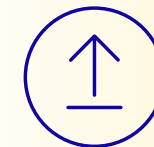
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## ABOUT GSG

GSG is the go-to public affairs, communications, and research partner for companies, causes, and campaigns. We work with our clients to build their reputations, tackle big challenges, create positive change, and win.

**Our Corporate Impact practice helps companies:**



**Reframe or Elevate**  
their CSR programs



**Create**  
impact-driven initiatives that resonate with key audiences



**Build & Protect**  
their brands in the new political environment