

One Semester Later: How Prospective and Current College Students' Perspectives of Higher Ed Have Changed between August and December 2020



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Over the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the higher education landscape. Colleges across the country have been forced to move courses fully or partially online, all while monitoring the health of their students as well as their own bottom lines. Current college students have had to bear the brunt of a haphazard shift to online education, squaring the reality that their college experience may look very different than they had anticipated by having to foot the bill for new equipment to take classes online and navigate classroom environments that may make learning more difficult. And high school seniors have had to make their own considerations about if and how the pandemic may shift their own

ability to pursue education beyond high school in the year ahead.

To better understand the pandemic's impact on current and prospective college students, New America and Third Way have partnered with Global Strategy Group to commission a series of national polls to track how the COVID-19 crisis has shifted these students' perceptions of higher education over time. Similar to what we gleaned in [our first round of research conducted in August of 2020](#), our latest poll from December 2020 finds that students continue to be concerned about the health and economic impacts of the virus, face challenges in an online learning environment, and expect institutions and Capitol Hill to lower tuition costs and set higher standards for quality learning both now and when the pandemic ends.

This poll surveyed 1,008 college students nationwide, including oversamples of 90 students who are the parent or guardian of a child or the caregiver to a family member, 165 Black students, 112 Latinx students, as well as 207 high school seniors. It was conducted December 2-15, 2020. Further details on the methodology can be found at the end of this memo.

Students' top concerns continue to be about the coronavirus pandemic and resulting economic fallout

Top concerns continue to be fear of catching COVID-19 and spreading it. Approximately 86% of students are concerned about their friends or family catching coronavirus (up from 83% in August), and 82% are concerned about catching coronavirus and spreading it to others. Black college students (88% up from 76%) and caregivers (91% up from 84%) in particular are concerned about friends and family catching the coronavirus. It's no surprise we've seen upticks in the concern surrounding COVID-19 given the current surge, and that surge in cases has included students. Approximately 15% say they have been infected with COVID-19, compared to only 6% who said so in fall. The continued stress of COVID-19 and the economy also seem to be taking a toll, as 79 percent of students say they have concerns about their mental health, up from 73% in August. And despite the worry surrounding COVID-19, there are some signs of vaccine hesitation among certain segments of college undergraduates. Overall, 68% say they would get the vaccine if it was required to be on campus for fall 2021, but for caregivers that number drops to 54% and for Black students it drops to 49%.

Economic woes are not far behind. Nearly three in four (71%) are worried about being able to pay non-education related bills. A vast majority of caregiving students (91%) worry about being able to pay bills--this is up from 81% in August. Concerns about being able to pay

tuition have also increased: 69% of college students think they will struggle to pay this bill, compared to 60% this August.

Students still trust their institutions, but are increasingly second guessing the cost of higher education

The lackluster pandemic response from institutions has shaken student faith. Nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, students believe their institutions of higher education have not responded forcefully or agilely enough. Over half (51%) of college students agree that “the way my institution handled the pandemic this past semester made me trust its leadership less,” which rises to 62% among caregiver students and 63% among Black students. Half (50%) of college students agree with the statement that “my institution only cares about the money it can get from me,” including 55% among Latinx students and 59% among Black students.

However, students still trust their institutions to keep them safe. Despite their disappointment in a more forceful institutional response to COVID, students overall still think their own institution has done a good job, although these numbers are trending slightly worse from earlier in the summer. Students overwhelmingly believe that “my institution is committed to giving me a quality education,” (82% now vs. 86% in August), “my institution has my best interest at heart” (71% now vs. 75% in August), and “my institution cares about my health and well being” (71% now, vs. 76% in August).

Yet students are increasingly questioning the cost of their degrees. Even as the unemployment rate ticks down to 6.7% as of December 2020, 80% of students say they are concerned about “getting *any* type of job once I graduate,” a sentiment shared by 86% of Latinx students and 90% of caregivers (up from 80% in August). This rattled confidence in degreed career outcomes worsens the perception of higher education’s affordability crisis, with 93% agreeing that “rising student loan debt is a major problem.” Without a strong response to help pay for college, 57% of college students are worried that “higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore,” up from 49% in August. (See chart below.) Even though there may be broader concerns about the overall cost of higher education, two-thirds (66%) of all students still agree with the statement that their own institution “offers a good return on investment for students.” This is a decline, however, from 78 percent in August.

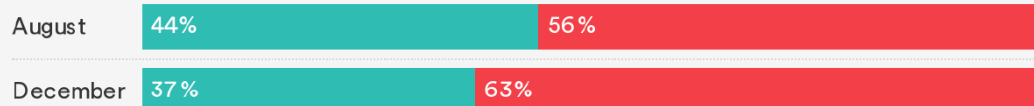
Agree or Disagree: Higher education is not worth the cost to students anymore

Agree (%) Disagree (%)

College Students (n=1,008)



Caregivers (n=90)



Latinx College Students (n=112)



Black College Students (n=165)



High School Seniors (n=207)



Source: Third Way/New America HigherEd Tracking Survey (December 2020)

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High school seniors are also paying attention to the price of higher education and its response to the pandemic. Colleges and universities should continue to pay close attention to college-bound high school seniors, who are signaling that the current state of affairs clouds their perceptions on the value of college. Half (50%) of students from this population say “higher education is a bad deal now that it has moved online,” and over three-in-four (77%) say the pandemic has made them change their plans when it comes to where they apply for college. Among the various considerations, 31% report applying closer to home (down from 41% in August), 29% report applying to schools with lower tuition (up from 21% in August), and 26% report applying to schools with clear COVID protocols that keep students safe (not asked in August). There is some encouraging news, however. There was a 13 point decrease in the number of high school students who say higher education is no longer worth the cost (see chart above). Perhaps it is indicative that high school students may see an end at the light of the tunnel and a return to normalcy as the end of pandemic draws near.

The challenges of online learning remain real and costly for students

Students continue to foot the bill for the shift to online education and have difficulty accessing coursework online. Over half (54%) of students have had to make purchases to continue their education online since the pandemic began in March, up from 41% when we surveyed students in August. And 75% of those who had to make purchases report receiving no funds from their institution for this purpose. These purchases have come at “significant” cost to 71% of students, up from 66% in August. This is especially true for caregivers who said in August that 81% of these purchases came at significant cost, which increased to 91% by December. Even accessing the internet has been a cost burden shifted onto the student – over one-in-four (28%) report not always or often having a fast and reliable internet connection for coursework, and 54% of students with an internet connection say it is a “significant” cost to them, with 72% of caregivers indicating the same. Most students (92%) use a laptop or desktop computer as the primary device to complete their coursework. And many students must share their devices with others in their household: 16% of students overall have to share their devices with others, including 34% of caregivers.

The shift online has degraded students' perceived educational experience--although the pandemic's end gives them hope. While the shift to online education has been challenging for all stakeholders, students remain wary of the value of education moving into a virtual setting. More than half (55%) of college students agree with the statement that "higher education is not good quality now that it has moved partially or entirely online," including 57% of college-bound high school seniors. Notably, though, students across the board indicate that they'd prefer to see their classes remain either online or in a hybrid setting for the 2021-22 academic year, with 76% of students overall (and 89% of caregivers, 86% of Latinx, and 78% of Black students) preferring one of these two options versus only 18% of students (and 7% of caregivers, 7% of Latinx, and 8% of Black students) indicating they'd like to take their classes fully in-person. High school seniors, however, tend to have a more favorable view towards shifting back to a more traditional on-campus experience, with 25% saying they'd like to take classes fully in-person.

Black students and caregivers continue to face particular challenges with online education, and it hasn't improved since the start of the pandemic. A startling 50% of caregiver students report it is a "big challenge" to take care of children while pursuing their education, up from 39% in August. And Black students are also suffering – 36% report it is a big challenge to get proper instruction from their teachers, up from 26% in August. Similarly, 30% of Black students report it is a big challenge to easily ask their instructors questions, up from 18% in August. *(See chart below).*

Shift in Opinions from August to December of Challenges Students Face as Learning Shifts Online

Percentage of students who consider the following items big challenges

Stay motivated to learn

	College Students (n=1,008)	Caregivers (n=90)	Latinx College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=165)	High School Seniors (n=207)
August	50%	45%	51%	42%	54%
December	60%	32%	50%	59%	65%

Having access to labs, specialized equipment, clinicals, and internships

	College Students (n=1,008)	Caregivers (n=90)	Latinx College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=165)	High School Seniors (n=207)
August	53%	53%	52%	40%	50%
December	50%	44%	56%	38%	51%

Taking care of children while pursuing your education

	College Students (n=1,008)	Caregivers (n=90)	Latinx College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=165)	High School Seniors (n=207)
August		39%			
December		50%			

Having enough resources to pay for school

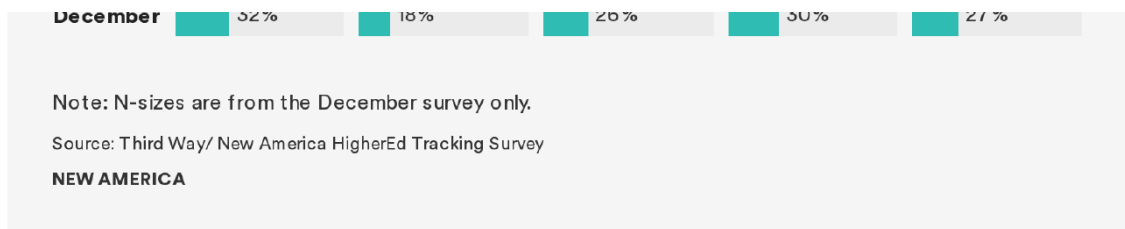
	College Students (n=1,008)	Caregivers (n=90)	Latinx College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=165)	High School Seniors (n=207)
August	37%	46%	47%	38%	25%
December	43%	58%	45%	35%	19%

Getting proper instruction from instructors or professors

	College Students (n=1,008)	Caregivers (n=90)	Latinx College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=165)	High School Seniors (n=207)
August	34%	33%	41%	26%	36%
December	35%	23%	32%	36%	40%

Being able to easily ask questions and interact with your instructor or professor

	College Students (n=1,008)	Caregivers (n=90)	Latinx College Students (n=112)	Black College Students (n=165)	High School Seniors (n=207)
August	32%	29%	31%	18%	33%
December	30%	40%	30%	30%	37%



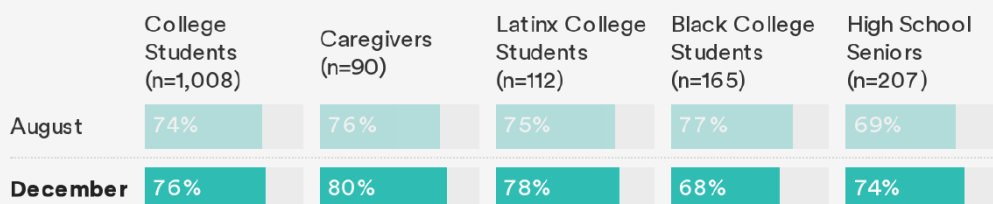
To retain students and encourage enrollment, there are clear actions students would like to see their institutions and the federal government prioritize in the coming months.

Students want higher education institutions to address their deepening economic pain. As the recession wears on, they are looking to higher education institutions to address their deepening economic anxiety with a range of policy actions. For instance, 69% of college students and 80% of caregivers say they would be more likely to re-enroll if their institution were “demonstrating positive employment outcomes for students through job placement rates or average wages.” Another 62% of college students say they would be more likely to re-enroll if their institution offered “new programs and certificates tailored to the new economy.” Caregiver students especially are more concerned that the education they receive connects to employability, more so or just as much as any type of cost reduction (*see chart below*).

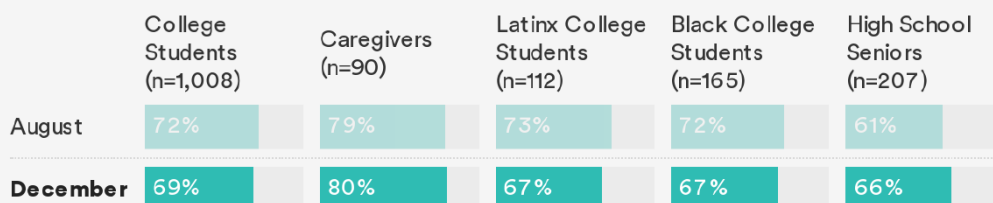
Shift in Opinions from August to December of Actions Higher Education Institutions Could Take to Make Students More Likely to Enroll or Re-enroll

Percentage of students who think the following actions would make them more likely to enroll or re-enroll

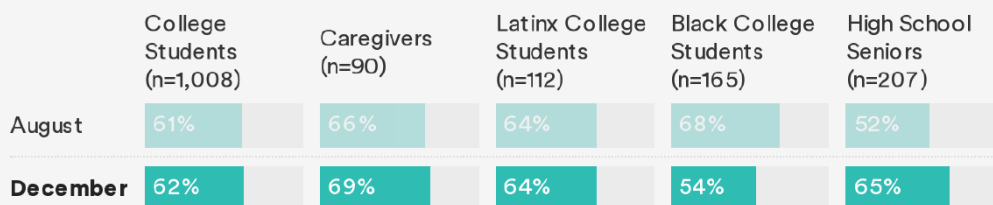
Offering discounted tuition if students cannot attend class in-person



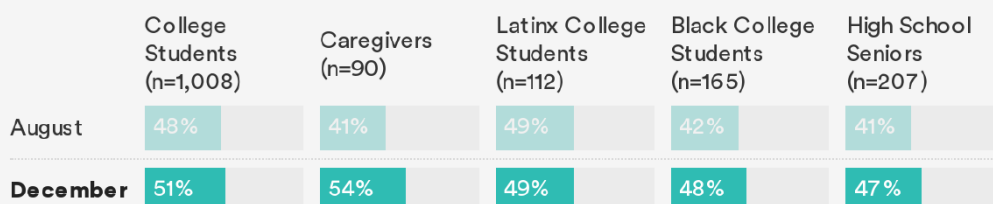
Demonstrating positive employment outcomes for students through job placement rates or average wages



Offering new programs and certificates tailored to the new economy

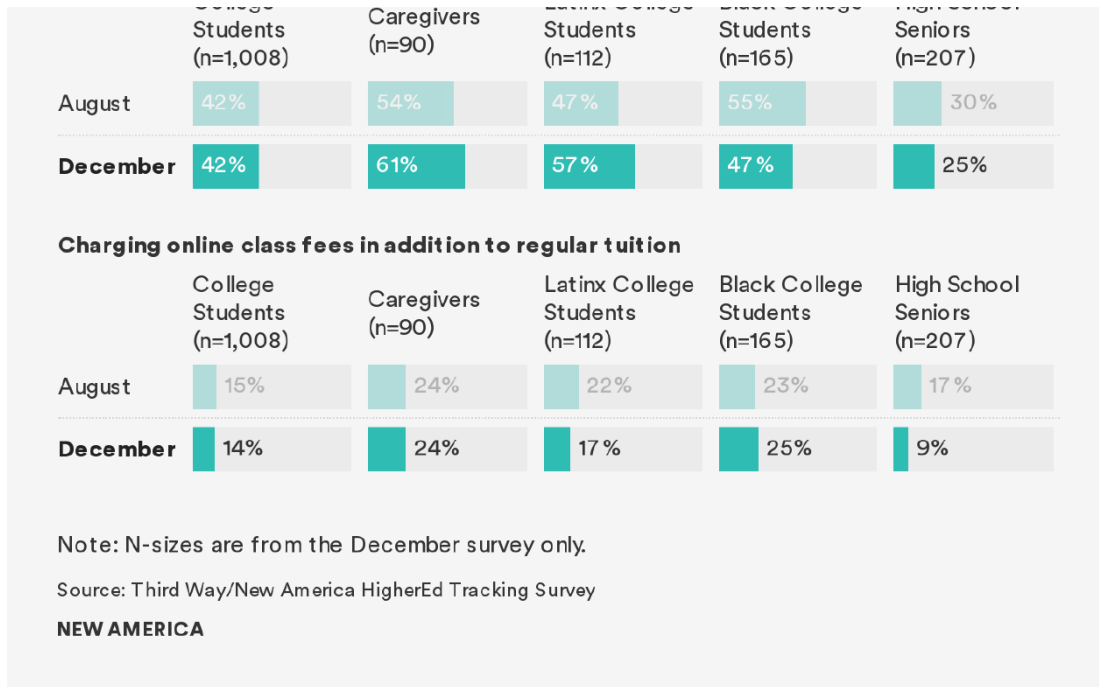


Holding in-person or hybrid classes



Holding online only classes

College Latinx College Black College High School

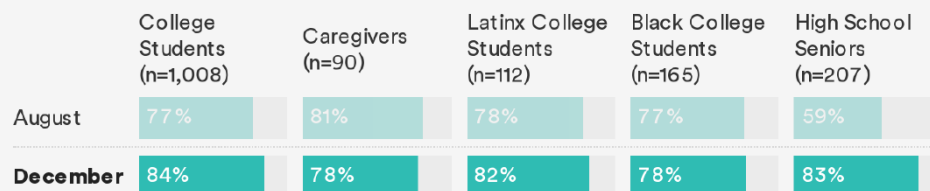


Students aren't letting the federal government off the hook either. Despite gridlock in Washington, students are making clear that they also expect action from Capitol Hill that ensures the value of their degrees. For instance, 84% believe it's an important priority to make higher education affordable and ensure it provides a good value to students, and 83% say it's important to ensure institutions receiving COVID relief funds are using it to help students – among a long list of other high-ranking priorities. And rounding out the top *three* government actions of importance is setting quality standards for online higher education programs (79% important), demonstrating most clearly that students are clamoring for help beyond only cost reduction for themselves. (*See chart below*).

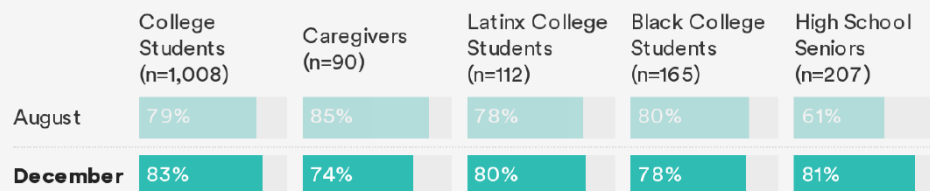
Shift in Opinions from August to December of important priorities students would like the federal government to take

Percentage of students who consider the following actions important priorities

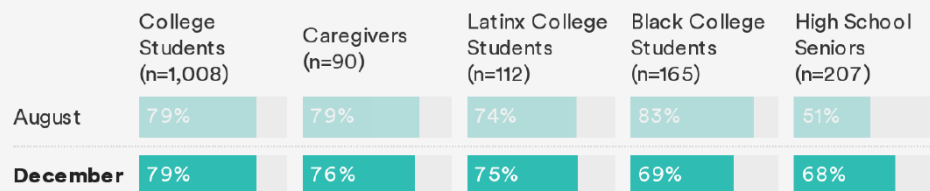
Making higher education affordable and ensuring it provides a good value to students



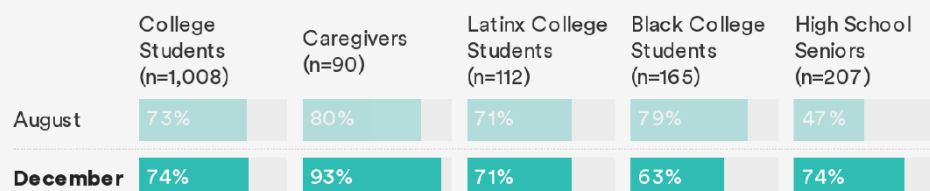
Making sure higher education institutions receiving coronavirus relief funds are using it to help students



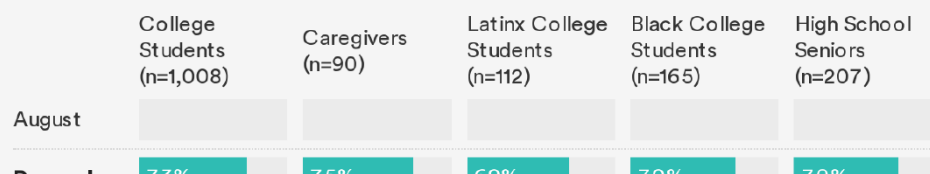
Setting quality standards for online higher education programs

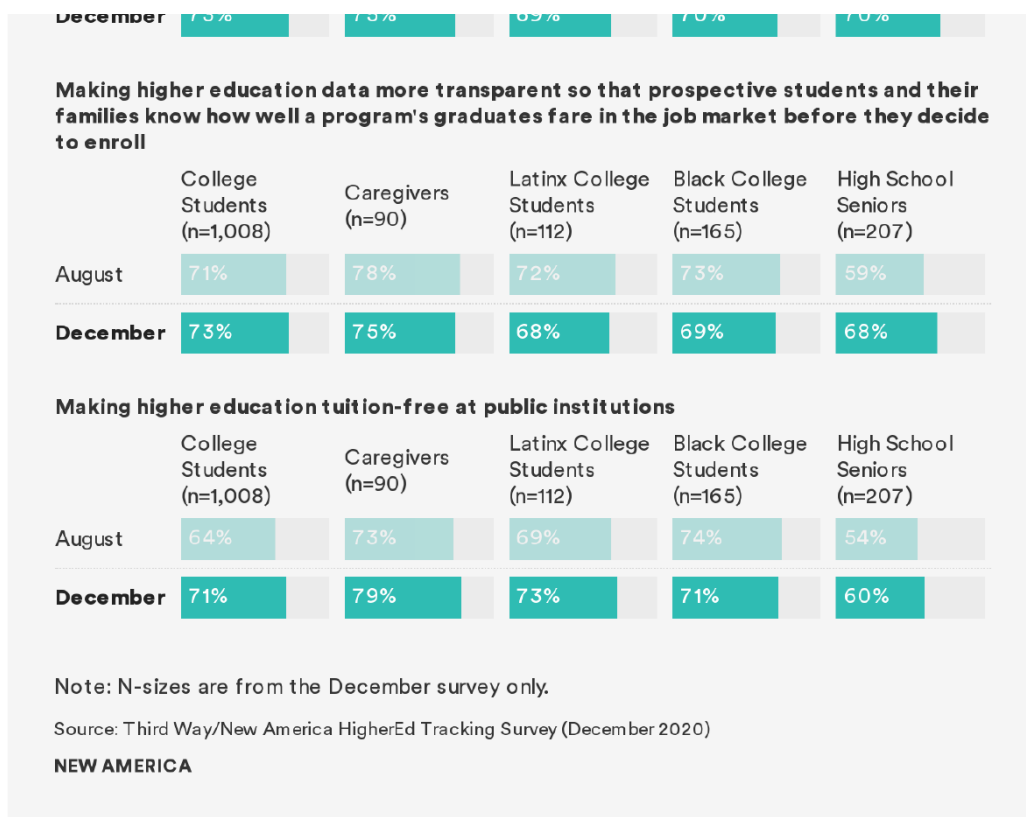


Doubling the maximum amount of federal financial assistance available to low-and moderate-income college students



Creating a program that helps students cover small, unexpected expenses





Conclusion

Overall, students from all walks of life—including high school seniors who have yet to start their postsecondary journeys to caregivers who are juggling multiple responsibilities while they seek a postsecondary degree—have felt the ripple effects of COVID-19 on the higher education system and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. As this survey and the survey we conducted back in August show, students are resilient and forgiving, but not dismissive of the real structural changes they'd like to see in our higher education system when it comes to lower tuition prices and more certainty from their institutions that they will prioritize teaching and learning ahead of their own bottom lines. New America and Third Way will continue to monitor the short-term and long-term impacts of the pandemic on students' postsecondary experiences to ensure that student voices are prominent in the recovery conversations happening among institutional leaders and policymakers.

About the poll

Global Strategy Group conducted an online survey of 1,008 college students nationwide, including samples of 90 caregivers, 165 Black students, and 112 Latinx students. The survey also included 207 high school seniors nationwide. The survey was conducted December 2 through 15, 2020. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and, in this case, the interval is $\pm 3.1\%$. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the student population are properly

represented.

Previously, Global Strategy Group also conducted an online survey of 1,407 college students nationwide, including samples of 223 caregivers, 253 Black students, and 311 Latinx students. The survey also included 211 high school seniors nationwide. The survey was conducted August 6 through 17, 2020. The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval and, in this case, the interval is $\pm 3.1\%$. The margin on the subsamples is larger. Care has been taken to ensure the geographic and demographic divisions of the expected national electorate are properly represented based on historical turnout.

Full topline of the survey can be found [here](#).

And you can reference the memo from our previous round of research [here](#).

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