

The Role of Electoral Engagement in Youth Social Movements

**Study I of "Protests, Politics, and Power:
Exploring the Connections Between Youth
Voting and Youth Movements"**

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Authors

Jerusha Conner, PhD, Professor of Education, Villanova University

Johnnie Lotesta, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Appalachian State University

Tova Wang, J.D., Democracy Fellow, Ash Center, Harvard Kennedy School

Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, PhD, Director, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life

Contributors

Alexandra Foley, Graduate Research Assistant, Harvard Kennedy School

Miranda E. Febus, Graduate Research Assistant, Villanova University

Kristen J. Oshyn, MSW, Research Consultant

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Introduction

The narrative that youth do not turn out to vote is a long-standing electoral trope. Historically, the participation of young people aged 18 to 29 in presidential elections has been low compared to that of older voters (File, 2012). In 2016, for example, 39% of eligible young voters cast a ballot. In midterm elections, youth turnout has tended to be even lower. In 2014, just 20% of young people voted. However, in the 2018 midterms, that number rose to 36%, as signs of increased interest emerged and young people began demonstrating their potential power. Then, in 2020, that potential was partially realized: 50% of young people cast a ballot, an unprecedented rate that was 11 points higher than in the previous presidential cycle (CIRCLE, 2021a). Although turnout increased across all age groups in 2020, even as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to ravage the country, researchers have concluded that the historic levels of voter turnout in 2020 were primarily driven by young voters (Ghitza & Robinson, 2021).

Early indications suggest this level of engagement is poised to continue. A 2021 CIRCLE poll showed that “More than three quarters of young people believe that they have the power and responsibility to change the country and that this work goes beyond elections” (CIRCLE, 2021b). A 2021 Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics (IOP) national poll of 18- to 29- year-olds found that “hope for America” is on the rise among young people, especially young people of color, despite current challenges and divisiveness in American politics. According to the IOP researchers, in 2009, 24% of young Americans considered themselves politically active. In 2021, that number rose to 36%. The most politically active among this cohort are Black youth, at 41% (Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, 2021).

Looking at young people just about to enter the electorate, a 2021 *New York Times* survey found “a generation of soon-to-be voters who felt disillusioned by government and politics and already hardened along political lines.” At the same time, the *Times* reported “a significant share of teenagers who felt motivated to become involved themselves, whether out of inspiration or frustration” (Miller, 2021). In other words, we are witnessing an increased interest and engagement in politics among young people under the age of 30, including those who are ineligible to vote. These findings run counter to the prevailing notion that voting in a presidential election is a young person’s first experience in civic engagement. Indeed, many young people who voted for the first time in the 2020 presidential election had already engaged politically via protests, marches, or social media (Lee, 2020).

What in *this moment* is leading to a remarkable increased interest among young people in being a part of political life?

Some research has connected the historic youth voter turnout that started in 2018 to heightened engagement in new youth-led social movement organizations focused on gun violence prevention and climate change (CIRCLE, 2018). Following the tragic February 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, new youth-led gun violence prevention organizations emerged, including March for Our Lives and GoodKids MadCity. Meanwhile, the student walkouts organized in response to the Parkland shooting inspired a Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, to launch school climate strikes. Over time, Thunberg’s strikes, in concert with her fiery indictments of business and political leaders for their climate inaction, helped galvanize millions of youth worldwide to participate in climate protests, sparking the creation of several new youth-led climate organizing groups, including U.S. Youth Climate Strike, Fridays for the Future, and Youth Climate Action Team. These groups joined a growing ecosystem of youth-led climate activist and advocacy organizations, including groups formed in 2016 and 2017 like Zero Hour, Youth vs. the Apocalypse, and Sunrise Movement. Several of these youth-led gun violence prevention and climate justice organizations have

centered voting as a key strategy for achieving their goals, leading to speculation that the rise in youth organizing has helped catalyze a surge in youth voting.

Of course, other more-established youth-led organizing groups have been active in voter engagement for many years. A 2013 field scan found that 41% of youth organizing groups in the U.S. were involved in electoral politics, and an additional 25% of groups expressed a desire to be so involved (Braxton, Buford, & Marasigan, 2013). By 2020, not only had the number of youth organizing groups in the country more than doubled, the proportion reporting voting and electoral engagement as a primary or shared issue also increased to 75%. (Valladares et al., 2021). Prior to the 2020 election, a survey by CIRCLE found that 60% of polled youth felt that they were “part of a movement that will vote to express its views” (CIRCLE, 2020).

The twin developments of heightened youth activism and increased youth voter participation raise questions about the role of youth-led social movement organizations in promoting youth voting. There are many strategies social movement organizations use to advocate for social change, and they do not always involve the ballot box. It has therefore been unclear whether, how, or why movement participation might make young people more likely to participate in electoral politics. Therefore, this study asks:

1. How, if at all, are contemporary youth-led social movement organizations drawing connections between electoral participation and their goals?
2. How does movement participation shape young people’s voting related attitudes and behaviors?
3. What challenges and needs do youth organizers identify as most pressing for the long-term sustainability of their work?

Study Overview

To understand the relationships between youth-led social movement organizations (SMOs) and young people’s voting-related attitudes and behaviors, this IRB-approved qualitative study draws primarily on interviews with leaders, staff, and rank-and-file members from five youth-led SMOs.¹ Interviews were supplemented by a focus group with rank-and-file SMO members, as well as follow-up surveys assessing members’ behaviors, attitudes, and experiences related to organizing and electoral engagement. To understand the broader environment in which our target SMOs are situated, we also conducted interviews with youth leaders from other SMOs, as well as high-ranking staff from organizations that support youth activism.

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol. They occurred online via Zoom, lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, and were transcribed and coded. In addition to interview and survey data, we collected artifacts from participating SMOs’ websites, public reports, webinars, emails, press releases, and official social media accounts. Because data collection preceded Election Day 2020, our data help explain the historic youth turnout in 2020 by identifying how, if at all, youth-led SMOs integrated voting into their day-to-day work for social change. They also elucidate how members’ engagement in these groups shaped their views on a highly anticipated and consequential presidential election.

¹ We define “youth-led social movement organizations” as “those in which youth feel and express responsibility to one another, to the core work of the organization, and to the organization itself through their involvement in running the day-to-day management of the organization; designing and implementing the core programming activities or campaigns; and shaping and re-shaping the organization’s culture and vision” (Rosen & Conner 2016, p. 64).

Recognizing that the social movements in which youth participate are fueled by a variety of organizational actors, we identified five youth-led SMOs that are racially and geographically diverse: Sunrise Movement, Youth Climate Action Team (YCAT), March for Our Lives (MfOL), GoodKids MadCity (GKMC), and Palmetto Youth Movement (PYM). These organizations work to address a range of issues but focus primarily on either climate justice or gun violence prevention (GVP) and community safety. We chose to focus on these two issue areas because previous research had drawn links between the rise of the youth-led GVP and climate justice movements and youth voter turnout (CIRCLE, 2018). We purposefully selected organizations with varying structures, sizes, and organizing models in order to illuminate the diversity of organizational actors within the broader climate and gun violence prevention movements.

Detailed organizational profiles describing the origins, growth, and key characteristics of our five target SMOs appear in the appendix of this report. Figure 1 presents key points from these profiles. Two of the five target SMOs, Sunrise and MfOL, are national in scope with 100,000 and 117,000 active members, respectively. PYM and YCAT, both climate justice SMOs, work at the state level. PYM has approximately 30 members distributed across South Carolina. YCAT has approximately 35 members organized in five Wisconsin-based hubs. The fifth target SMO, GKMC, organizes in two different cities: Baltimore and Chicago. The Baltimore hub has over 1,800 Instagram followers at the time of writing, while the Chicago hub has over 20,000.²

GKMC is entirely composed of Black youth. PYM and YCAT were founded and led by queer young women of color. By contrast, MfOL and Sunrise were founded by groups of predominantly White youth; however, both SMOs have worked to center the leadership of youth of color since their founding. YCAT, PYM, and GKMC do not have any members older than 22. While the base of MfOL is primarily high school- and college-aged young people, adults hold positions on the national staff. Sunrise, similarly, has staff members in their 20s and early 30s, and the organization sets 34 as the age limit for members. Perhaps for this reason, Sunrise was perceived as “an adult organization” by respondents in YCAT and PYM.

Figure 1. Organization Profiles



² At the time of writing, there is no youth of color-led gun violence prevention group that organizes at a national scale like MfOL. Since the disbandment of U.S. Youth Climate Strike, there is also no national based youth of color-led climate justice action group akin to Sunrise. In addition, we were unable to confirm a formal membership count with GKMC. Therefore, we use social media followers as a proxy for engagement.

Working with leaders in each SMO, we chose local chapters from which to sample respondents for interviews. These chapters were selected based on geographic diversity and leaders’ own questions about their work, such as a desire to better understand the successes or challenges of organizing activities in specific locales. Within each chapter, we interviewed and then surveyed up to six individuals, representing a mix of leaders, core members, and occasional participants. Beyond the chapters, we interviewed three to five national staff or “directors” from each of the national groups. We conducted one focus group with five members from one of our selected Sunrise Movement hubs in order to better understand group culture and dynamics. In total, our participants comprise 69 youth activists, including five members from non-focal SMOs. We did not solicit demographic information during interviews. Table 1 presents the demographic composition of the rank-and-file members who completed the follow-up survey after being interviewed.³

For additional insight into the overall landscape of contemporary youth activism, we interviewed four adults who lead organizations that support youth activists. These organizations are Alliance for Youth Organizing, the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, Momentum, and the Youth Activism Project. We also interviewed the founder of Future Coalition and a former board member of Million Hoodies for Justice. In interviews, we asked these respondents about recent trends in youth organizing, common challenges unique to youth-led SMOs, and opportunities for growing and sustaining youth-led SMOs.

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Participants

Organizations	Sunrise Movement	30%
	March for Our Lives	30%
	Youth Climate Action Team	16%
	Palmetto Youth Movement	14%
	GoodKids MadCity	9%
Gender Identity	Woman	74%
	Man	21%
	Do not subscribe to gender binaries	5%
Ethno-racial Identity	White	64%
	Black	12%
	Latinx	3%
	Mixed race	21%
SES	Low	20%
	Low/Middle	20%
	Middle	28%
	Upper Middle/Upper	33%
Age	Range: 13-27 Mean: 18.86	

³ Among the rank-and-file members we interviewed, we had a survey response rate of 86%. Comparisons with other studies suggest there is an overrepresentation of female and white youth in our sample. In its 2020 *National Youth Organizing Field Scan*, the Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) surveyed 312 youth organizing groups. Forty-nine percent of surveyed groups reported that the majority of their core leadership are cisgender and transgender young women and girls. Seventy percent indicated that Black individuals are “significantly represented in their core youth leadership,” and 75% indicated that Latinx individuals are so represented. By comparison, 25% of youth organizing groups surveyed by FCYO indicated that White individuals are significantly represented in their core youth leadership. FCYO’s 2020 Field Scan also suggests that Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American youth are underrepresented in our sample. Among the groups that FCYO surveyed, 40% indicated that Asian/Pacific Islander individuals are significantly represented in their core youth leadership, and 16% indicated the same for Native American youth. In contrast, none of the youth who completed our survey reported Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American identities.

Our research team, consisting of three adult researchers and four student researchers, followed a rigorous, multi-step coding process to arrive at our findings. Throughout data collection and analysis, we paid careful attention to our own personal and collective subjectivities. We met regularly to compare observations and practice reflexivity. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings and ensure that our work had impact validity, we engaged in robust member checking with key informants in our five focal organizations.

Findings

The Role of Voting in Organizations' Theories of Change

The degree to which voting figures in the theories of change of the youth-led SMOs in this study can be positioned on a spectrum (See Figure 2). The right end of the spectrum represents groups that fully embrace electoral politics and center voting, such as Sunrise Movement. The left end of the spectrum is populated by groups like the now-dissolved U.S. Youth Climate Strike, which dispute that voting can lead to sustainable change.

Figure 2. Spectrum of Voting in Youth-Led SMO's Theories of Change



The two national organizations in our study—Sunrise Movement and MfOL—consider voting to be one piece of a larger electoral strategy. The goal of turning out young voters is multifaceted: by establishing youth as a voting bloc large enough to garner politicians' attention, movements can shift political power away from corporations and toward people. Leaders in these organizations describe political power as more than putting people into office. While corporate executives currently have the ears of politicians on legislation and judicial nominees, Sunrise and MfOL envision the public holding that sway. These two SMOs are heavily engaged in activities related to voter turnout, such as organizing text banking, phone banking, and voter registration efforts.

Sunrise Movement draws a clear link between direct action and electoral engagement. Of the SMOs that participated in this research, Sunrise Movement is the most explicit in describing political power and people power as inextricable to achieve change. Moving forward, Sunrise is deepening its investment in the electoral process with a new program to recruit its own candidates to run for office at all levels of government.⁴ MfOL also incorporates people power into its theory of change as a means to pursue political power. When asked about the role of voting, one participant said, “Within March for Our Lives, we’re always pushing voting, because voting is the first step in getting involved in the political process and enacting change. But we also have to be holding our elected officials accountable through direct action, through those community conversations, through meetings with our elected officials.” In short, neither Sunrise Movement nor MfOL saw voting as the singular solution to the issues they seek to address. Rather, they embraced it as one among multiple strategies necessary for building youth power and creating social change.

For Palmetto Youth Movement (PYM), GOTV and electoral efforts are neither central activities nor core priorities. Nonetheless, the organization does conceptualize the problem of climate change as political and is developing strategies accordingly. It is focused on building a progressive political base and advancing new policy solutions to curb climate change in South Carolina and the Southeast Coastal Region through collaborations with other regional organizations and advocacy for a Green New Deal for South Carolina. Although the organization considered making political endorsements in the run-up to the 2020 election, it ultimately decided that no candidates aligned strongly enough with their values and agenda to earn their support.

Even farther on the spectrum of centering or de-centering voting are GKMC and YCAT, both of which focus on meeting their communities’ immediate needs, rather than supporting or electing candidates to office. These groups hold a vision in which communities, rather than politicians, create the change they want and require. When asked to reflect on voting as a strategy for effecting change, leaders in both organizations acknowledge that voting can serve in this capacity. Yet they also argue that it is too slow and inconsistent a mechanism to ameliorate the pressing needs they see in their communities. As one YCAT leader explained, “We can create the biggest change within our own communities because it’s where we live. ... No policy is going to solve everything. It’s really going to be us that solves this. It’s us, the people.” Indeed, in its “Anti-Platform,” YCAT explicitly states that it does not endorse “only using electoral politics to achieve goals.”

A focus on community needs and engagement has not prevented YCAT leaders and members from engaging in electoral politics. Although some YCAT members described voting as a means of propping up a failed political system, YCAT as an organization is clear-eyed about the realities of the capitalist democracy in which they currently live. Therefore, when asked about voting, leaders will acknowledge voting as important. As one YCAT member noted, “Our hub actually had done a little bit of that electoral work because even though we don’t believe in this system, we still exist in the system.” In the lead up to the 2020 election, YCAT promoted voter registration drives and sponsored panels with local candidates.

GKMC bases its organizing strategies around the premise that communities cannot wait for politicians, who do not always follow through on their promises. Communities must be self-determined to make the changes they can on their own, while demanding the resources to address those they cannot. “The way we see it is: if we can fix one issue today, we can fix another tomorrow. ... And I think what drives GKMC is knowing that we are the voice to people who feel voiceless and we are the vision for people who don’t see an out,” one leader explained. Their social media presence illustrates this vision of fixing one problem at a time by focusing on the pressing needs of their neighbors: trauma support, food and supply drives, and direct support requests for specific individuals and families.

⁴ To learn more about Sunrise Movement’s Candidate Program, visit: <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/sunrise-candidate-program/>

GKMC organizers' focus on community needs over electoral work was thrown into stark relief by one respondent who plainly stated, "There's so much happening right now that we're trying to fix in our community that like, of course, we're going to encourage you to vote, but when you think about having a voter drive or having a food drive, we're gonna pick the food." Yet, even as GKMC forges ahead to effect the change their communities need, they also use their platform to share with community members information on voting, candidates running for office, and legislation that impacts their communities. GKMC organizes direct actions to draw attention to their communities' needs and pressure those in office to hear their demands. In other words, voting may not be this SMOs priority, but that does not prevent them from educating and engaging their members and their communities in voting and politics.

Still other groups, like the now-dissolved U.S. Youth Climate Strike, exist at the opposite end of the spectrum from the groups that endorse electoralism. They see voting as a way of upholding a corrupt system that is incapable of effecting the kind of change communities need. They call for an anti-capitalist revolution and critique Bernie Sanders's democratic socialism as too "middle of the road." Interestingly, the groups that have formed in its wake, such as YCAT and PYM, have taken more moderate or affirmative stances towards voter engagement.

In short, the youth-led SMOs in the climate justice and gun violence prevention spaces included in this study put forward diverse theories of change. All seek to effect systemic change and to usher in a new status quo, and all aim to do so by building and leveraging the power of young people. Yet the SMOs differ in their assessments of voting as a key lever of change. Sunrise, MfOL, and to a certain extent PYM, understand voting as both a vehicle for policy change and a means of demonstrating youth political power. GKMC and YCAT tend to favor other approaches to empowering their members and addressing the problems facing their communities.

Youth Activists' Attitudes Toward Voting

Voting is Important

Irrespective of the differences in their SMOs' theories of change or level of engagement in electoral strategies, the youth respondents in this study tended to see voting in instrumental terms. None of the survey respondents rated voting as "not at all important" as a vehicle for change, and 74% saw it as extremely or very important. In interviews and in the focus group, respondents routinely described voting as important, and across all SMOs, most adopted a pragmatic stance regarding its utility.

Several participants rooted voting's significance in its strategic potential to shape the political landscape in which they were organizing. As one climate activist put it, "You're voting [for] what political ground you want to be fighting on." Similarly, a PYM member referred to voting as a "tactic and not the end goal." This framing became especially potent after Sanders lost the primary to Biden, a candidate whom many youth were initially reluctant to support. Other respondents similarly acknowledged that voting is not about picking "*the one*" who will fix everything, but about setting up the conditions that will make needed policy reform more likely. As a Sunrise participant explained, "Voting isn't like getting married; it's like getting on a bus." In other words, voting was not about falling in love or making a commitment to a candidate; it was a way of getting a community, or the country, headed in the right direction.

GVP activists also viewed voting as a strategic imperative to achieving their policy objectives. A MfOL member stated, "You're not going to be able to get any kind of real legislation passed if you

"Voting isn't like getting married; it's like getting on a bus."

have people that don't even believe that gun violence is a threat or just aren't willing to make any headway at all." She continued, "At least if you have people that will exchange in some kind of conversation with you, then you have a chance of moving it a bit further." These respondents understood that the nature of their struggle shifts depending on who is in office. Therefore, they saw electing allies or "pushable" representatives as necessary for effecting legislative change. In this way, they aligned voting with the expansion of youth power, even when it entailed voting for what they viewed as non-ideal candidates. By voting for Biden, for example, youth activists believed they could shift the political terrain in ways that gave their voices greater weight. In so doing, they believed they could increase their collective power and put themselves in a better position to achieve their movement goals.

Voting is Necessary but not Sufficient

The youth-led SMOs we studied varied in how much they prioritized voting within their theories of change. Nevertheless, respondents across all five SMOs, even those that emphasized voting in their theories of change, described electoral engagement as insufficient for bringing about the kind of change they seek. This perspective mirrored the role of voting in their organizations' theories of change. Respondents largely adopted a "yes and..." stance when asked about the role voting can play in change processes, believing that voting must be paired with other strategies, including education, organizing, and direct action. For example, a PYM member argued that direct action and organizing are "as, if not more, effective than voting, which is why we need to do both." Referencing the climate crisis, he went on, "We're not going to vote our way out of this, I don't think. It's going to have to consist of more direct action." In their view, voting might help place sympathetic allies into office, but additional organizing and direct action are necessary to ensure policy change.

When it comes to addressing long-standing, entrenched problems like gun violence and climate change, voting was viewed as neither a silver bullet nor an end goal by the respondents. Instead, respondents emphasized the importance of organizing *through*, not *to* elections. As one climate activist put it, youth must "take it beyond [the polls] and keep organizing and keep working, rather than just voting and calling it a day." A MfOL leader paraphrased Noam Chomsky, saying, "I love the line: 'voting is something that takes you away from the real work.' You take a 10-15 minute break [to vote], and then you go back to the real work." A Sunrise member explained how this real work spanned election cycles: "The process of change-making is building people power, exerting that people power to force politicians to make a choice, electing the ones that are aligned with your views, and then pressuring them once they're in office through political actions that call them to task." Even those respondents from SMOs that were laser-focused on voter engagement activities in the run-up to the election understood that their work shifted after Election Day; it did not end.

"We're not going to vote our way out of this, I don't think. It's going to have to consist of more direct action."

In part because their work extended beyond the ballot box, describing voting as "one tool in the toolbox" was a common refrain among respondents, irrespective of whether their SMO centered electoralism as a strategy. Participants in this study understood that a full complement of activities is necessary to drive change, and their repertoires of practice included community organizing, staging protests and creative actions, hosting webinars and other educational efforts, leading community initiatives such as healing circles and community gardens, as well as voter registration drives and GOTV efforts.

Respondents also felt it was vital to have a wide range of strategies beyond voting to effect social change, because many either saw voting as flawed or recognized that their peers did. Across all five SMOs, respondents identified pitfalls associated with voting or electoral politics. Some described issues of voter suppression, including limited polling locations and long lines at the polls in communities of color. Some critiqued the electoral college and gerrymandering as strategies for “rigging” the outcome. Others expressed feeling “jaded,” “disillusioned,” and “cynical,” having seen politicians make promises in order to get elected, only to abandon those promises once in office. Some decried money in politics and the ways politicians can be corrupted by powerful lobbyists or big-ticket donors. Still others understood that their peers and colleagues saw voting as a means of upholding a capitalist system built on the premise of White supremacy. Finally, some argued that politics and voting for politicians would not solve the crises facing Americans or the world. One Sunrise member acknowledged that voting is essential but chafed at the idea of voting as “the end-all, be-all solution.” He continued:

So, there are Nazis in the streets. There's an armed militia that is shooting protesters... 'Vote!' Well, I'm not sure that you're going to solve our militias [problem] with voting, you know? That's actually a different problem. So, I think there are some things where it's like, do I think we have the best set of candidates all the time? No. Do I also think that our political system is captured by special interests and is fundamentally undemocratic? Yes. Do I still think, when possible, when you have the opportunity, you should engage in a harm reduction [vote] or sometimes, an exciting voting opportunity, and you should encourage other people to do so? Certainly... But I think the most important thing is sustained action at the local, regional, and national levels.

Like many other respondents, this activist expressed that it is important to participate in

The Impact Of: Black Lives Matter

Our interviews occurred during the summer and early fall of 2020, amidst widespread protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. During this time, the young people we interviewed reflected deeply on what racial justice mobilizations, and systemic racism more broadly, meant for their movements and organizations. In this moment of crisis and uncertainty, young people used their movement organizations to create spaces for reflection and dialogue. Sunrise Movement hosted trainings on the relationship between racial justice and climate justice. MfOL similarly hosted a webinar on the history of and intersections between race, policing, and gun violence in the United States. YCAT assembled a series of trainings on racial justice organizing, including sessions on anti-oppression for non-Black allies and White privilege. Respondents from all organizations in our study offered reflections on the intersections between climate justice, gun violence, and structural racism, as well as the need to center racial equity in their movements. The rise of abolitionist frameworks into the mainstream has also prompted new questions about movement goals and strategies. At the time of writing, conversations were ongoing within several of our target SMOs about whether and how police abolition should be incorporated into movement goals.

Young people's reflections on the Black Lives Matter movement also led them to embrace new collaborations and to organize and encourage actions in support of BLM. GKMC members held a solidarity rally in honor of Breonna Taylor, as well as multiple marches for the defense of black lives and police abolition. Sunrise Movement offered staff support for Black Lives Matter digital organizing campaigns and issued a set of Justice, Equity, and Anti-Oppression priorities for their movement. MfOL shared ways members could demonstrate solidarity with BLM, including phone banking to demand police divestment, donating to BIPOC-led groups, and protesting in ways that respect the leadership of youth of color. A YCAT hub canceled a water quality webinar to demonstrate solidarity with protesters and used social media to share information about BIPOC-led groups to which members could donate.


elections and to encourage others to do so as well. Yet, he was also clear-eyed that voting in and of itself would not lead to the kind of radical change he and his peers believed necessary. As discussed further below, some youth brought these critiques with them when they joined their SMOs. Others, however, arrived at these critiques through their SMO participation.

Strategies Youth-Led SMOs Use to Create Engaged Voters

While acknowledging that voter engagement activities were not the sole, or even the core, activity of the SMOs we studied, here we zero in on the strategies the SMOs used to help increase electoral interest and turnout among young people. The SMOs in our study used a range of strategies to create engaged voters, both inside and outside their member networks. Members from every SMO we studied reported engaging in at least one Get Out the Vote (GOTV) effort, whether nonpartisan voter registration; information sharing; or phone banking, canvassing in support of, or endorsing specific candidates. Across the spectrum, interview respondents reported engaging in approximately 3.5 distinct GOTV effort types per person, on average, in the lead up to the 2020 election. Members of MfOL, PYM, and Sunrise reported engaging in the most GOTV efforts per person, with averages of 4.37, 3.57, and 3.33 per person, respectively. While there was significant variation in the types of GOTV efforts that each organization performed, at least one member from every organization in our study reported engaging in each of the following to help get out the vote during the 2020 election cycle: sharing information externally, focusing on state/local government, and promoting voter turnout.

Disseminating Information

There was little discussion among respondents of internal information sharing to ensure members themselves were voting, which one participant described as something that “goes without saying.” However, many respondents made references to sharing information with those outside their SMOs on where to vote, how to register to vote, how to vote by mail versus in person, voting absentee, etc.—with an emphasis on reaching first time voters. Many participants referenced that this information sharing often happened in person in the past, such as through tabling at events or at local high schools or college campuses, but that the COVID-19 pandemic meant that much of the information sharing occurred virtually. One MfOL organizer referred to the difficulty many are facing to get the information they need as a result of the pandemic, and said that “Instagram activism” is vital to helping others their age “make a well-rounded decision” and “be able to make change, because they can vote.” A PYM member similarly noted that “social media is making it a trend to vote.” This emphasis on social media activism as a means of sharing information and creating engaged voters was reflected in the Twitter account behavior of some of the SMOs studied, particularly MfOL and Sunrise. In the lead up to the 2020 election, both the Sunrise and MfOL national Twitter accounts frequently posted information about voting or links to check one’s registration status.



“Social media is making it a trend to vote.”

Amplifying State and Local Politics

Beyond external information sharing both in person and virtually, many groups reported an emphasis on state and local government, such as getting informed about school board or city council races, or

showing up to a legislative hearing. Some participants saw this focus as a means of helping young people, especially young people of color whose communities have faced significant disenfranchisement, feel more empowered and hopeful. As one GKMC member stated:

We have these real conversations about why people don't vote, and it's normally because they feel helpless...So with people feeling hopeless, you know, having these one-on-one conversations where [we say,] "Yes, up there, that's bad. Let's start looking down here. Who are we going to elect for city council? Who are we going to elect for mayor and governor?"

For others, focusing on state and local politics was a way to help build excitement and turnout among young progressive voters who were less than enthused about the 2020 election's presidential candidates. One Sunrise chapter leader described a strategy of using excitement about down-ballot candidates as "get-out-the-vote bait" to help drive turnout in the presidential election. For still others, a focus on state and local politics allowed them to set what felt like more appropriate goals given the political conditions in their areas. This was especially true for GVP and climate justice activists in Republican-leaning states. As one PYM member emphasized to us, what is possible in a progressive city like Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York is often not possible in South Carolina. Thus, a focus on state and local politics provided a means for youth-led SMOs to identify targets and strategies appropriate for their particular area.

Spurring Electoral Activity

Registering voters and phone or text banking were both mentioned more often than most other GOTV efforts we examined, but these activities were skewed by the national groups' higher frequency of participation. Though a few members of GKMC, PYM, Sunrise, and YCAT each mentioned engaging in voter registration, MfOL members reported a particularly high rate of participation in voter registration efforts. Many also referenced collaborations with other voter registration organizations, such as HeadCount, as part of this work. For example, a YCAT member noted that the League of Conservation Voters had recently reached out to them about participating in a GOTV effort. Another YCAT member recalled partnering with 350 Madison: "They had an initiative to get out the vote. So we had some of our members work with them in posting about different things related to voting and where you can register in different polling locations." A leader in PYM described how she was contacted by members from Generation Ratify, a youth-led feminist organization, and invited to partner on an electoral effort. A March for Our Lives high school organizer referenced collaborating with another school club on a GOTV drive.

Though some members of MfOL and YCAT mentioned participating in phone banking efforts, this activity was central to Sunrise Movement's 2020 election strategy, and many Sunrise members reported participating in these campaigns. Unlike MfOL's non-partisan voter registration, much of the Sunrise phone banking efforts were in support of particular candidates. As one Sunrise organizer described:

I don't think we do straight-up get out the vote registration, because our work is targeted towards specific progressive candidates, and when we phone bank for people, we will ask if they have a plan to vote. ... And the dialers that we use to phone bank will tell us where people's voting locations are and so we'll support people in going to vote, but I think just in terms of bipartisan voter registration, we don't—that's not where we're putting our energy.

Sunrise’s emphasis on phone banking for specific candidates was also reflected in the movement’s various social media accounts, which often posted links to sign up for the organization’s virtual phone banks.

Finally, we also observed the use of endorsements as a tool for both recruitment and for building youth power, particularly among our target climate justice SMOs. Two of the climate organizations we studied—Sunrise and YCAT—mentioned endorsing specific candidates. Particularly for Sunrise, endorsements were a major part of their GOTV strategy and helped guide where members devoted their efforts during the election season. Furthermore, one Sunrise national leader connected endorsements to recruitment efforts: “We see our engagement in elections as an opportunity to bring and absorb more people into the movement. So, especially if they lost, those people who might have been activated by the candidate outside of our structure, can come to us afterwards for a home for the next thing to do.” Although this respondent did not mention Senator Bernie Sanders by name, youth-led climate justice SMOs did actively welcome and find ways to reenergize dispirited Sanders supporters after his loss to now-President Joe Biden in the primary.

How Movement Participation Shaped Young People’s Views of Voting

Given the consistency in respondents’ views of voting as necessary but insufficient, it is natural to wonder to what extent their involvement in youth-led SMOs shaped their attitudes and approaches to voting. In what follows, we explore how youth described their SMO’s impact on their voting-related attitudes.

Impact on Views of Voting

Across all SMOs in our study, just over one quarter of interview respondents reported that participating in their youth-led SMO improved their perception of voting as a vehicle for change (Figure 3). To be sure, the majority of interview respondents *did not* credit their SMO with changing their perception of voting. Still, it is notable that anywhere from 13% to 43% of interview respondents from each target SMO credited their engagement in movement activity with improving their perception of voting. This improvement was most pronounced among chapter leaders and committed participants, and it was not at all expressed by occasional participants (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Movement Impact on Individual Perceptions of Voting, by Organization

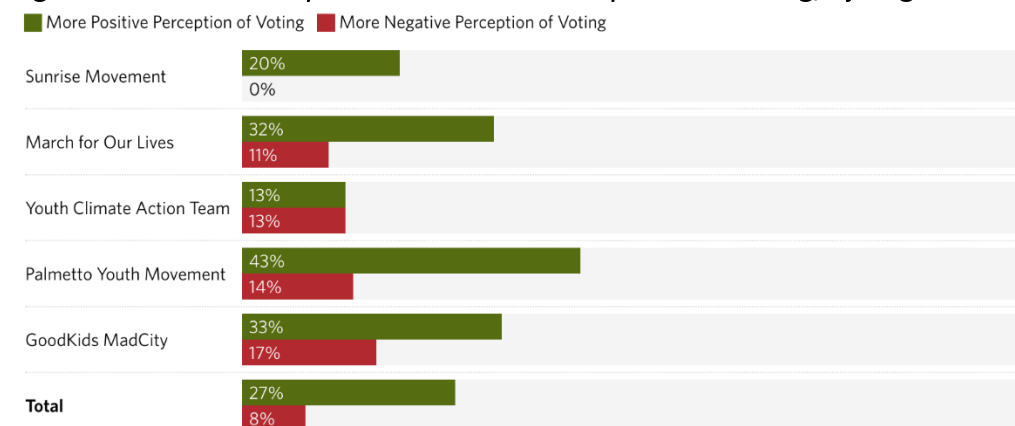
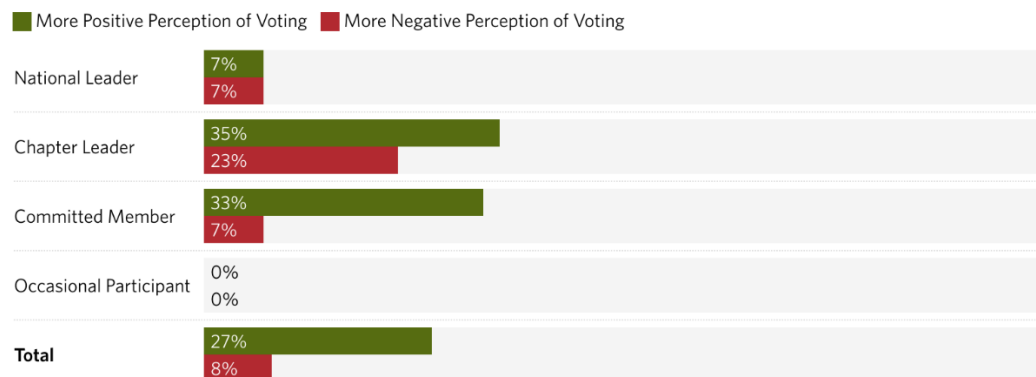


Figure 4. Movement Impact on Individual Perceptions of Voting, by Respondent Type



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Source: Youth Movements & Voting Study interviews with youth-led SMO leaders and members

Although the interview data presented in the figures above tell a slightly different story, survey data focused only on rank-and-file members suggest that improved perceptions of voting were more common among members of the national SMOs that center voting in their theories of change than among the state and community-based organizations that did not emphasize voting. In the survey data, the percentage of MfOL members who saw voting as very or extremely important grew by 47 points across their time in the organization. By contrast, these percentages declined for GKMC and YCAT members and remained flat for PYM members. For Sunrise members, the percentage who saw voting as “extremely important” grew by ten points, while the share of those who saw it as “very important” shrank by the same amount. At the time of our data collection in the summer and fall of 2020, Sunrise and MfOL members were more likely than the members of the other groups to see voting as very or extremely important. As one organizer reflected when asked to consider how Sunrise impacted their perception of voting:

Where is our power? Where, where do we have leverage? Where do we have weapons to force the change that we want, not to ask for the change that we want, to force the change that we want? I've come to see voting as one of those weapons, as one of those tools.

Additionally, a MfOL member reflected on how movement participation impacted their perception of the importance of voting:

I think my involvement in March for Our Lives affected my perception of voting because it made me realize that I couldn't just work on gun violence itself. I needed to work from other outlets. ... I didn't really realize that there are so many other facets of social justice that you need to address before going in. And I think March for Our Lives has shown me that if I can help change culture, that's great, but I need to change the law in order to make lasting change and progress. And I think that was something that was really interesting because March for Our Lives isn't a voting movement, but it so directly relies on voting.

For both these youth, engagement in Sunrise and MfOL led them to view voting as a vehicle for youth power and a tool for achieving their goals.

To be sure, youth-led SMO's impact on members' perceptions of voting were not unidirectional. Just as some interview respondents credited their SMO with giving them a more positive view of voting, others reported gaining a more negative or critical perspective. For some, this shift in perspective involved a realization that voting alone would not create the change they wished to see. As one GKMC organizer explained, being involved in her SMO made her "realize that voting is not always the best means to an end, even though it's very important. It's useful, but it's not always the end-all-be-all strategy of trying to cause change." A MfOL member similarly reflected, "When I started in this movement, I thought voting was the cure-all." Yet, as they engaged in the fight against gun violence, the same MfOL member said they came to realize that "direct action is a very big part of eradicating gun violence." They continued, "Voting is part of it, yes; they go hand in hand. But you can't have one without the other." In other words, for some youth activists, SMO participation led them to situate voting as one valuable, yet imperfect, vehicle for change among a range of other important strategies.

For others, electoral engagement via their SMO led them to develop critiques of the American political system. In reflecting on her organization's endorsement of Senator Sanders for the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary, one YCAT member expressed disappointment at his decision to drop out of the race. For her, Sanders' exit from the race reflected a representational shortcoming within the American political party system. Other youth activists from the GVP movement reported becoming more aware of the influence of interest groups like the National Rifle Association and more critical of institutional politics as a result.

Still others suggested that their participation in our focal SMOs reinforced, rather than changed, their voting-related attitudes. This response appeared among 17% of our interview respondents. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect that at least some degree of self-selection is at play in young people's engagement in the youth-led SMOs we studied. This self-selection means that the young people in our study may have chosen to join SMOs with theories of change that aligned with their own, including in relation to the importance of voting. Self-selection also introduces the possibility that youth-led SMOs, like other groups, can sometimes act as echo chambers where existing views get amplified and reinforced.

Nevertheless, our findings suggest that SMOs can create opportunities for young people to refine and adjust their voting-related attitudes as they move through the organization and acquire new experiences. As we highlighted earlier in this report, even those SMOs that did not center voting within their theories of change created opportunities for members to engage in electoral politics by collaborating with GOTV-focused organizations and encouraging individuals to register and to vote. We can think of these opportunities as "touch points" with the electoral system. With each repeated touch, young people garner a new experience or observation, which then feeds back to shape individual perceptions and attitudes.

As our findings show, this feedback loop does not always lead to more positive perceptions of voting. Depending on the information gained and the interpersonal dynamics at play, it may lead to more critical perspectives or reinforced positions. What is clear, however, is that youth-led SMOs offer opportunities for affirming, revising, or refining voting-related attitudes.

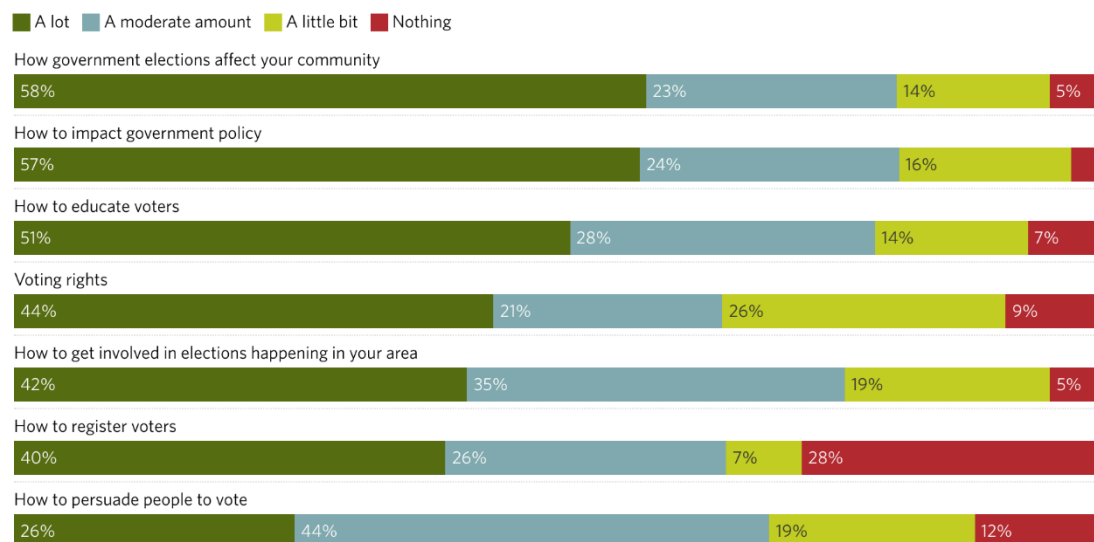
"March for Our Lives has shown me that if I can help change culture, that's great, but I need to change the law in order to make lasting change and progress."

Deepening Knowledge and New Evaluations

Consonant with previous research, survey data show that participating in SMOs led to new knowledge and new ways of thinking among study respondents. All but two survey respondents

reported learning about how to get involved in elections happening in their area, and a full 90% reported learning about voting rights (Figure 5). Seventy-two percent of respondents learned about registering voters, 88% learned about how to persuade others to vote, and 93% learned about how to educate voters. Notably, these learnings were not confined to elections, but also extended to the policymaking process. Eighty-six percent of all survey respondents reported learning at least a little bit about how to impact government policy, and over 50% reported learning “a lot.” Indeed, interview respondents often discussed gaining deeper knowledge about state and local politics in the course of their SMO work. In this way, youth-led SMOs’ engagement in local elections and participation in specific policy debates serve not just to advance movement goals, but also to educate members about how their government works, as well as how to locate and utilize levers of power to create social change.

Figure 5. How Much Survey Respondents Learned about Voting, Elections, and Government



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Source: Youth Movements & Voting Study survey of youth-led SMO members and chapter leaders

For one-third of interview respondents, movement participation also appears to have shaped how they view and evaluate individual political parties and candidates. Nineteen percent of all interview respondents reported that experiences gained through their SMO led them to be more critical of specific political parties and candidates. Young climate justice activists tended to direct this criticism toward moderate Democrats, while young GVP activists—particularly MfOL members—directed it toward Republicans. This trend carried across all groups except PYM, with 13% to 32% of YCAT, GKMC, Sunrise, and MfOL interview respondents expressing new or greater criticisms of actors within institutional politics as a result of their movement work.

Respondents also reported learning about areas beyond voting and electoral politics. For example, all survey respondents reported learning more about social change and organizing (Figure 6). Ninety-three percent reported learning “a lot” or “a moderate amount” about how to effect social change. Eighty-one percent said they learned “a lot” or “a moderate amount” about how to organize others to achieve a goal, and 95% said they learned “a lot” or “a moderate amount” about standing up for what one believes in. Just as youth-led SMOs provided opportunities for young people to engage and learn about the electoral process and institutional politics, so too did they create pathways for leadership development and individual growth.

Figure 6. How Much Survey Respondents Learned about Organizing and Social Change



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Source: Youth Movements & Voting Study survey of youth-led SMO members and chapter leaders

Sustaining Youth-Led Social Movement Organizations: Opportunities & Challenges

The youth-led SMOs included in this study pioneered many creative and effective strategies for recruitment and retention, activities that are foundational to building their base, demonstrating their power, and sustaining their work over the long haul. They successfully leveraged the affordances of social media, prioritized relationship-building, created inclusive spaces, and engaged one another in robust critical social analysis that proved transformative to many individuals' ways of thinking and being. All of the youth-led SMOs studied also forged meaningful collaborations with other groups. These collaborations, which enhanced their capacity to draw attention to issues of concern, meet community needs, or mount pressure on politicians, further enabled them to sustain their work.

Despite these demonstrable strengths, the youth-led SMOs in this study all experienced challenges that could threaten their sustainability: high rates of activist burnout, limited funding, and tensions arising from organizational structure. The degrees to which the SMOs experienced these challenges varied; nevertheless, their experiences raise important considerations for funders as well as organizers.

Burnout

A number of interview respondents emphasized issues of burnout within their SMOs. This was particularly an issue at the chapter level, where much of the daily work of organizing falls on unpaid volunteers. Beyond their efforts to build a new organization, develop movement strategy, and organize others toward shared goals, respondents reported the challenges of balancing school, work, family, and other extracurricular commitments. These competing demands can lead young people who stay in the movement to experience emotional distress and even material insecurity. Several respondents, particularly those from GKMC and MfOL, also discussed the challenges of dealing with trauma from exposure to policing and gun violence. Others reflected on the pressures of having to deal with immediate needs like food or housing insecurity, while still others described battles with generalized anxiety about impending ecological catastrophe. In short, the young people interviewed for this study shared a collective experience of multidimensional pressures and demands, albeit from different sources.

Within this context, burnout and feelings of exhaustion or defeat can pose a serious challenge to movement retention and young people's mental health. As one MfOL chapter lead told us:

I've seen so many of my friends, myself included, get to a point where you can't work anymore because... I mean, we have to handle school, and outside obligations, and sports or whatever; and then we come home, and we get on Zoom calls, and we try to mobilize a nation [motions air quotes] or whatever. And we feel like we have a weight of the world on our shoulders and then, I mean, it just leads to its own set of problems for sure.

A Sunrise National leader similarly reflected on the problem of burnout, noting in particular the material challenges faced by young people who must work to support themselves:

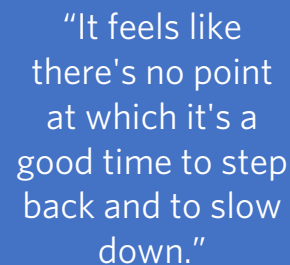
It's really hard to actually ask someone to get a lot of tasks done within a short deadline when it's draining. I mean, it's draining because at the end of the day what a lot of these volunteers are doing is, essentially, we're doing the Sunrise work and then when we're done doing Sunrise work, we're staying up a little bit later, we're getting up a little bit earlier to do another kind of work just to get some type of compensation, just to get food on the table. Just, just to survive.

While activism itself can sometimes serve as a survival strategy and a means of coping with oppression and trauma, the labor of activism, on top of one's regular work and homelife responsibilities, can cause exhaustion and overwhelm.

"Burnout is a huge question among organizers," one Sunrise chapter lead reflected. For her, the risk of burnout was amplified by the pace at which she felt work needed to happen within the climate movement in order to ensure the election of a more climate-friendly President and the implementation of new climate policy. "There's a huge, huge thing right now where we've got this sense of like, 'This is it! We have to get this done now,'" she explained. The flip side of that urgency, however, is the anxiety of knowing that no individual, or group of individuals, can keep up that intensity of engagement forever. This then raised the question of how to maintain momentum over the long-haul when it feels like the urgency and time pressure will never release. The chapter lead continued, "It feels like there's no point at which it's a good time to step back and to slow down." As reflected in the experience of this one organizer, respondents struggled knowing that keeping up a grueling, relentless pace was unsustainable, yet relenting was similarly untenable.

For some, burnout was amplified by the voluntary nature of the work. Beyond asking young people to do emotionally and mentally demanding work without pay, SMOs face competition from other volunteer organizations for members' attention and time. One MfOL chapter leader referenced the risk of losing members to other entities that offer paid positions for organizing work, like the Democratic Party. As he told us: "There's something to be said about burnout when you're not getting paid. Nonprofit organizations, they're great for getting people involved, but it's hard to keep people around. You know? There are always organizing opportunities for the Democratic Party that are paid, and I think it causes a lot of burnout."

For youth organizers, the voluntary nature of their work thus presents a conundrum. How do you keep members energized, hopeful, and engaged when they are not compensated for their work? And how do you avoid losing members to other, paid, organizing opportunities?



"It feels like there's no point at which it's a good time to step back and to slow down."

Innovating to Support One Another Through Adversity

Respondents identified several strategies for managing burnout in the course of our interviews. The first was to create cultures where it is acceptable to delegate tasks and step back from one's movement work for a period of time. As one YCAT member explained:

We just always had a really good system of sharing the workload. If someone has something, they can disappear for a few weeks, and then come back and pick right up where they had left off. And we send out meeting notes, and we have that schedule—not schedule, but passing around the facilitating, that kind of thing. I think that really has retained people; just to know that you're not going to burn out and you're not putting in any more work than anyone else is.

By allowing members to take breaks and to reassign their work, youth leaders in our target organizations aimed to mitigate burnout and create spaces where members felt encouraged to return, even if they needed to step away for a period of time.

A second strategy, adopted by Sunrise, was to use small groups and regular mental health check-ins to keep tabs on how members are doing and to create space to talk about shared struggles. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools and workplaces were closed and many were forced to socially distance and stay home, one Sunrise hub developed a buddy system to facilitate mental health check-ins and relationship building among members. As recounted by one member, this strategy developed in response to a recognition that members were "stretched thin" in the midst of a pandemic and ongoing movement work. These one-on-ones created space to "make sure people are doing okay" during the pandemic and to gauge "if people still feel the capacity to engage and be involved." Similarly, Sunrise National implemented a support group program led by a social worker to help combat feelings of burnout.

Yet the same respondent who referenced support groups as a strategy for managing burnout also emphasized that these efforts to provide emotional support were "not enough." In addition to creating space for self-care and mutual support, a number of respondents expressed a need for funding to sustain organizers through their work. Behind this call for material support was a recognition that organizing and activism take real mental, emotional, and physical labor, which young

The Impact Of: The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new and unexpected challenges to the young people in our study. Beyond transitions to distance learning, loss of face-to-face interactions, and economic insecurity, youth movement leaders and members had to determine how to continue their work in a remote environment. Amidst reiterative crises of health, social isolation, economic downturn, and systemic racism, the young people in our study displayed outstanding resilience, building new repertoires of collective action and mobilizing quickly to meet the needs of their communities.

MfOL shifted its Our Power Campaign to an online format. It included art for young activists to download and share, including works with slogans like: "Don't bring a gun to a public health fight," and "School's cancelled; democracy isn't. Register to vote." Sunrise Movement maintained member engagement via its Sunrise School, a tiered, online virtual organizing training program for members and other interested youth. GKMC organized a mutual aid network and food drives. YCAT shifted its planned Earth Day strike to online platforms, including multiple rounds of climate justice-focused Kahoot, an interactive, online game that allows individuals to learn about a topic together in real time. Born during the pandemic, PYM did not have to shift operations, but did engage its members in signal boosting the Movement for Black Lives protests across South Carolina during the fall of 2020.

people often volunteer on top of other home, school, and work commitments. As the Sunrise national leader continued:

I know everyone is not able to get paid, but... For example, we have positions open for hiring. But at the end of the day, if I'm not going to be hired, then I'm not going to be able to put food on my table. I'm not going to be paying my bills. So things that I'm trying to figure out are: Where do we need to create something? Do we need stipends? Do we need to start up mutual aid again? And what do we need to make sure folks are taken care of? Because it's hard to take care of your community and to do this leading large numbers of people when you can't even take care of yourself.

Offering compensation, then, is a means of recognizing this work and ensuring that young people have the material means to sustain themselves as they work for social change.

Funding to support organizing work carries at its core a question of economic justice, and respondents from Sunrise Movement in particular, discussed the issue in these terms.⁵ Young people who must financially support themselves—disproportionately working class, immigrant, and young people of color—must work additional hours or forgo paid labor in order to engage in voluntary social movement activity. For some, this can lead to food and housing insecurity. Beyond the question of movement retention, this then raises the question of equity and economic justice within SMOs themselves. As one Sunrise respondent told us:

Literally I have heard other people say, 'Oh, I'm gonna have to sleep in my car tonight.' Or 'I'm not going to be able to pay this bill.' How are we saying we want to fight for a Green New Deal and we want clean air, clean water, good jobs for everyone, affordable housing, when we can't even take care of the people in our movement who are fighting for these things? When we can't even live out that dream right now?

Thus, while being a volunteer-powered organization has undeniable appeal, the youth activists we interviewed realized it is a model that can have exclusionary implications.

Recognizing the tolls of burnout on members and taking steps to ameliorate these adverse impacts can help youth-led SMOs retain members and sustain them in their movement work. Creating a strong sense of belonging, emphasizing self- and collective care, instituting mutual aid, and creating need-based stipend programs are strategies organizations can use to shift the nature of member engagement with the organization from one that is experienced as “extractive” to one that is “life-sustaining.”

In addition to creating space for self-care and mutual support, a number of respondents expressed a need for funding to sustain organizers through their work. Behind this call for material support was a recognition that organizing and activism take real mental, emotional, and physical labor, which young people often volunteer on top of other home, school, and work commitments.

⁵ The issue of economic justice in youth organizing was also raised by members of the Florida-based, youth-led SMO Dream Defenders, which focuses on gun violence prevention. In supplementary background interviews, Dream Defenders leaders and members similarly discussed the importance of recognizing the costs associated with organizing work, particularly for BIPOC and working-class youth. Recognizing this, Dream Defenders has created a number of paid organizing positions and fellowship opportunities.

Organizational Structure

All the youth-led SMOs in our study embraced some form of distributed leadership. Even MfOL, the SMO with the most centralized chain of command among those we studied, is composed primarily of autonomous and volunteer-based hubs. Coordinating collective action across these units posed challenges for youth-led SMOs, particularly those that aimed to scale beyond the local level. In this section, we discuss our target youth-led SMOs' shared struggles to define accountability, support local chapters' autonomy, and maintain organizational coherence. We also highlight practices our target groups used to address these challenges.

Challenges: Coherence, Accountability, and Conflict Resolution

Though allowing for the creation of "leaderful" movements, youth organizers' embrace of distributed leadership models also introduced uncertainty regarding coherence and accountability as the SMOs grew. A key example of this struggle is reflected in the now-dissolved U.S. Youth Climate Strike, which disbanded in June 2020. Like most of the SMOs in our study, U.S. Climate Strike rejected hierarchy in favor of a coalitional organizational structure. While this model afforded local chapters great autonomy over their own organizing activities and strategic preferences, it left undefined how internal disagreements and conflicts would be resolved. Disagreements over strategy mushroomed into infighting and what some described as "toxic" divisions. Without a mechanism to resolve coalitional disagreements, the organization began to fall apart.

Movement structure has been a key point of discussion for YCAT and Sunrise organizers as well. As YCAT grew to encompass a coalition of affiliated hubs across the country, national leaders confronted intensifying disagreements over strategy and goals. Internal conflict became so divisive that YCAT organizers announced they were disbanding their national entity in August 2020 and returning their focus to supporting local, Wisconsin-based hubs. Within Sunrise, disagreements over organizational priorities and strategy have similarly prompted conflict. In response, Sunrise recently launched a "Refrontloading Team" to consider whether and how it might adjust its organizational structure to better facilitate coordinated decision-making without sacrificing the autonomy of its hubs.

These struggles reflect tensions that can arise as movement organizations work to balance the tradeoffs between accountability, autonomy, and cohesion. While distributed leadership structures create ample opportunities for individuals to take ownership over local "hub" or "chapter" activity, they can leave unanswered difficult questions about accountability and conflict resolution: Who has the authority to make decisions for the SMO as a whole? On what foundation is that authority based? How will members of the SMO work together to define goals and strategies, and how will the organization resolve disagreements when they arise?

Relatedly, the forms of distributed leadership adopted by youth SMOs in our study tend to leave open the question of leadership succession. It is difficult to determine who should assume the next phase of organizational leadership when there are no formal pathways through which leaders are recruited, trained, and appointed. The issue of succession is of particular concern to youth-led social movement organizations in which leaders, by definition, age out of their roles. Indeed, at the time of our research, founders of Sunrise Movement were grappling with this question of how to pass leadership on to a new generation of organizers. These findings indicate that there is a need for time, space, and resources to support youth-led SMOs as they confront these challenges.

Practices for Strengthening Coherence, Creating Accountability, and Managing Conflict

The youth-led SMOs in our study adopted a number of practices and organizational innovations to increase coherence, create accountability, and encourage conflict resolution within their organizations. To strengthen coherence, YCAT and Palmetto Youth Movement developed internal documents detailing the organizations' missions, goals, platforms, and principles. All new members must read and agree to these documents, with the hope that they will provide a basis for interactions among members and direction for organizing activities.

MfOL's Youth Congress aims to increase accountability, center BIPOC voices, and solidify youth leadership as the SMO continues to expand. The Youth Congress is composed of youth activists from across the country who collectively advise on MfOL strategy and direction. Congress members also lead committees on advocacy, ARTivism, and social media, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion. Sunrise Movement similarly introduced a steering committee consisting of the executive director, representatives from each division, and three elected at-large staff members to help coordinate strategic decision making across the organization.

The SMOs in our study have also experimented with organizational policies and practices to manage conflict resolution. For example, YCAT pulled examples from other organizations to develop its own sexual harassment/assault response and prevention (SHARP) policy, outlining procedures for handling incidents of harassment and assault. YCAT shared this policy with PYM, which adapted and then adopted it. For its first several months, PYM also had a licensed adult counselor on call should any interpersonal disputes arise; however, this resource was discontinued once members felt confident in their own capacity to address any emergent conflicts. GKMC uses relational organizing and transformative justice to resolve conflicts, and it has also sought guidance from BIPOC elders.

Funding

Consonant with other research, our interview data indicate funding disparities across youth-led SMOs, both those focused on climate justice and on gun violence prevention. Youth organizing groups in general need more funding. As the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing noted in a recent report, "the youth organizing field remains badly under-resourced," despite marked growth in the number of youth-led groups over the last ten years (Shah, 2020). Background interviews with leaders in the field indicated that, within this under-resourced environment, national SMOs tend to receive substantially more funding for their work than those focused on organizing at the state or local levels.

Moreover, existing research highlights funding disparities between BIPOC-led and White-led organizations. In May 2020, Echoing Green and The Bridgespan Group released a report showing that "race remains a defining factor when looking at which organizations get funded and how much they receive" (Sullivan, 2020). Research found that "on average the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 24% smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts. When it comes to the holy grail of financial support—unrestricted funding—the picture is even bleaker. The unrestricted net assets of the Black-led organizations are 76% smaller than their white-led counterparts. The stark disparity in unrestricted assets is particularly startling as such funding often represents a proxy for trust" (Dorsey, Bradach, & Kim, 2020).

While there was a surge in financial support for the Movement for Black Lives, as one activist said, "If you look at the Movement for Black Lives and how it has continued to grow in the last couple of years, certainly young people are at the center of that, but they're not necessarily organizing as young people, right? The Movement for Black Lives doesn't identify as a youth movement." One leader

of a black youth-led SMO also shared that some in his organization felt they were competing with the Movement for Black Lives for the same pot of money.

The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing has pointed out that gaps in funding are especially acute in the area of leadership development, particularly among SMOs involving young people of color and communities directly impacted by climate injustice and gun violence. All SMOs need help cultivating a leadership "pipeline" and supporting individuals' personal "transformation," especially those that are disadvantaged (Shah, 2020). Transformation requires time for reflecting on where the movement is, where it is going, and what organizers want it to be. According to one leader in the field:

Dream Defenders [a Florida-based, youth-led gun violence prevention SMO] went through a whole phase of realizing they were very popular. They were all over the media. ... So they actually stepped back and said, 'My God, our popularity is not translating into power.' And they stepped back and they spent a time sort of going in and saying, 'What does it mean for us to actually build power?' And they lost funding during that time period, because funders didn't like that."

Thus, in this case, the preferences of funders worked at cross purposes with youth organizers' need for critical reflection, collective learning, and strategic adjustment.

At a more basic level, many of the youth organizers we interviewed expressed a desire and a need for guidance on issues like incorporation requirements, organizational management, and how to write a grant proposal. Noting that she received some institutional help to learn budgeting and grant writing, one of the leaders of GKMC recounted her experience in the following way: "A lot was through trial and error. How do you write a good grant? What are some keywords that they're going to look for in this application to get you to be considered?" As emphasized by other respondents, these are skills that must be learned, and not all youth are equally equipped to take on the day-to-day tasks of managing an organization. One of the original leaders of the defunct Million Hoodies for Justice—which aspired to be a national gun violence prevention organization led by youth of color—talked about how young BIPOC activists might have a greater need for training and skill development than more affluent White youth. This challenge of having to learn the skills to manage an organization, and having to do so without access to allies who can lend expertise or financial support, is part of the reason he believes Million Hoodies for Justice was unable to survive. He stated:

A lot of the people that are doing the organizing and that are being organized don't have experience working in institutions, have not had access to the same education opportunities, may not necessarily have a college degree, or may not have even graduated from high school and understand how to pull this off. They don't necessarily have wealthy friends that are able to fund them, especially in the early days. ... They are blocked from getting so many resources that, I think, to pull this off from a truly grassroots perspective would be nearly impossible, particularly on an issue that's as contentious as gun violence.

Gaps in funding are especially acute in the area of leadership development, particularly among SMOs involving young people of color and communities directly impacted by climate injustice and gun violence.

In other words, disparities in preparedness to perform the administrative and fundraising tasks necessary for running an organization—themselves the result of structural inequities across race and class lines—mean some youth organizers face more challenges in growing and sustaining their movements than others. More equitable access to mentoring, training, and leadership development is therefore key to supporting a vibrant and inclusive youth organizing ecosystem.

Beyond disparities in preparedness and access to resources for running an organization, our interviews pointed to general disparities in funding support between majority-BIPOC and majority-White youth-led SMOs. Some pointed to the example of MfOL, which quickly received generous donations from celebrities and philanthropic organizations. According to press reports, “Organizers of the ‘March For Our Lives’ rally in Washington put the early cost estimate for the event at \$5 million, and said they had ‘several million dollars’ left to continue to push for stricter gun laws and fight gun violence” (Hoisington, 2018). This surge in funding frustrated some young organizers of color who had long been seeking support for their programs to address the gun violence their communities face daily.

As a staff member of the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FYCO) told us, “What we saw post-Parkland for sure was literally millions of dollars being given to young people to work on those issues, and the young people of color who had been working on those issues for years and years not receiving that funding.” To their credit, MfOL organizers were cognizant of this dynamic. As they learned more about the systemic roots of everyday gun violence, they quickly adapted their policy goals and adjusted their march plans to share the stage with young organizers of color. They also started making subgrants to BIPOC youth-led organizations through their Aid & Alliance program, in an effort to “decenter whiteness” and support ongoing gun violence prevention work in the most impacted communities (See MfOL organizational summary, in appendix).⁶

Disparities in funding are not limited to gun violence prevention SMOs; they also impact climate justice organizing. Referring to Sunrise, a leader in the field indicated that “young people of color have been organizing around environmental racism for years and not getting the same attention.” This interview respondent expressed, and existing research indicates, that racial disparities in access to funding reverberate across the SMO ecosystem, despite efforts on the part of some funders to support and lift up the young people most directly impacted by the social issues they seek to address.

Clearly there is a need for greater resources for young people of color working on both of these issues in their own backyards. As noted, it is important to fund organizations and leaders who are directly and immediately impacted by the problems of gun violence and climate change on an everyday basis. Not all of these organizations want to be large or work nationally, but they do need the capacity to develop and sustain their organizations and their movement. Funders should also recognize that, while affluent young activists have the luxury of contributing to their movements for free or for low wages, young people from poor and working-class families cannot sustain such an approach. Sunrise and GKMC have taken steps to address these needs through mutual aid programs, stipends, and funded internships, though demand still outpaces capacity.

Finally, youth-led SMOs that were actively involved in electoral work identified a need for sustained support between election cycles. The executive director of the Alliance for Youth Action reflected that, while the funding to youth groups engaged in electoral work went from \$360,000 in 2016, to \$2 million in 2018, to \$11 million in 2020, she believes that it is possible that this funding was purely transactional and that, with President Biden elected, the spigot may turn off. Indeed, some of the youth-led SMOs in this study reported experiencing a sharp drop-off in financial support once the major national election passed. It is unreasonable to assume that groups can scale up efforts two months before an election. Creative and robust programs to engage youth in electoral activities take

⁶ For information on the Aid & Alliance Program, see: <https://marchforourlives.com/aidalliance/>

time and resources to develop. Therefore, longer-term sustained investments are critical to ensure youth-led SMOS have the capacity to engage in electoral organizing.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The preponderance of interview, survey, and archival evidence reviewed here suggests that youth-led climate justice and gun violence prevention SMOs can create opportunities for young people to participate in voting-related activities and electoral politics. This was true even among youth-led SMOs that did not explicitly center voting within their organizational theories of change. Overall, youth activists and organizers expressed a pragmatic view of voting, seeing it as an important yet insufficient means of bringing about social change. The young people in our study reported engaging in voting and electoral politics despite recognizing significant deficits in our democracy, including voter suppression, the influence of money in politics, and systemic racism. For a subset of our respondents, engagement in their SMO contributed to a more positive view of voting as a vehicle for change. For others, it led to a more nuanced assessment of the strategic value of voting relative to other vehicles for change. Though SMOs, like other organizations, can sometimes reinforce existing views, our data suggest that the opportunities youth-led SMOs create for young people to engage in voting and electoral politics can lead to new learning which, in turn, can lead to the refinement and reformulation of opinions.

While our research offers insights into how youth movement participation can shape individual members' perceptions of voting, it remains to be seen how successful youth movements' GOTV efforts were at spurring electoral engagement among youth outside their membership. Future research could therefore build on this work by examining the youth targeted by the GOTV efforts described in this report, and the impact these efforts had on targeted individuals' electoral and civic participation. Surveys of these populations or controlled experiments testing the efficacy of particular messages and outreach strategies could help fill this gap in understanding. Similarly, future research could investigate the degree to which early electoral engagement correlates with later activism and movement participation. Voting is often presented as a high-bar outcome of previous civic engagement. Yet members of the youth-led SMOs that participated in this study expressed the idea that voting was actually a low-bar entry point into civic engagement and activism among young people. Further systematic study of youth pathways to organizing, civic engagement, and voter participation will help clarify these relationships.

In this final section of our report, we offer recommendations to organizers, funders, and those who collaborate with youth-led SMOs. Our first set of recommendations focus on supporting youth-led SMOs to increase youth voter turnout, while our second set of recommendations are geared at strengthening and sustaining the vital civic work of youth-led SMOs for years to come.

To Increase Youth Voter Turnout and Electoral Engagement

- **Adult-led Voter Engagement Organizations should:**
 - Continue to collaborate with youth-led SMOs and invite them to partner on voter registration drives and GOTV efforts. However, it is incumbent on these voter engagement organizations to make the ask in ways that respect the various critiques SMOs and their members may have of voting as a lever for change. Such approaches include respecting the SMO's goals, acknowledging their concerns about electoral politics, connecting voter engagement work to their other organizing efforts, and

articulating how voting, in concert with other strategies, can effect local, grassroots change.

- Explore partnerships with youth-led SMOs on civic engagement activities not directly tied to the ballot box. In accordance with previous research, our findings indicate that nonviolent direct action; community service; educational panels; and participation in state, local, and federal policy processes facilitate valuable civic and political learning among young people.

- **Funders should:**

- Make longer-term investments that can sustain capacity across election cycles and during off-election years, as groups may struggle to ramp up electoral engagement strategies in August or September of an election year.
- Recognize the diversity of ways in which youth-led SMOs connect young people to the ballot box and to electoral work, including through art, direct action, issue education, and community service. In light of this, we suggest that grants should not be contingent on traditional understandings of canvassing or registration drives. Celebrate the creativity and innovation of youth-led SMOs, rather than expecting them to practice conventional methods of voter engagement.

- **Organizers should:**

- Use down-ballot candidates, including their own members running for local office, to energize potential voters and drive them to the polls. National organizations should create easy channels for local chapters or hubs to bring local candidates who align with the movement's values and agenda to national attention. National organizations should also create opportunities, but not pressure, for local hubs to engage in phone or text-banking for candidates in other communities, while recognizing that hubs must prioritize their own communities.
- Confront head-on the narrative of low youth turnout as a form of voter suppression. Continue using art, song, social media, trainings, and a carefully curated mix of in-person and digital events to educate and activate members.
- Collaborate with other well-vetted groups, such as the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, to engage in voter outreach and registration, merging the electoral or civic engagement infrastructure of these groups with any planned actions, community events, or ongoing campaigns. These strategic partnerships are especially important for groups without the staff capacity to create robust quality control processes that ensure legal compliance. Voter registration laws and regulations vary widely across different jurisdictions and can change regularly. A lack of adherence to specific requirements can lead to legal action against individuals, threaten the IRS tax status of organizations, or result in the rejection of registration forms. Through direct partnership with groups that have already built staff or technological infrastructure,

organizers can benefit from established support systems and compliance processes.

- Strive for integrated voter organizing, which couples voter engagement work with issue organizing and leadership development, as many youth activists are wary of focusing solely on voting to the exclusion of other means of effecting change.

To Support and Sustain Youth-Led SMOs

- **Adult-led organizations should:**

- Partner with youth-led SMOs in ways that build their internal capacities, such as working together to secure funding for one of their projects.
- Use social media and personal networks to amplify the work of youth activists. Consider organizing mirrored events or featuring youth-led movement activities on your social media pages or in your community spaces.
- Express appreciation for the diverse approaches to social change that youth-led SMOs embrace. Ask how they can "show up" to support youth organizers in their work and be willing to do so on their terms.

- **Funders should:**

- Recognize that a vibrant ecosystem of youth-led activism must include an array of groups and leaders: national groups as well as community-based SMOs, youth leaders representing diverse racial, ethnic, class, and gender identities. This may entail taking risks to fund newer organizations or organizations with initially smaller bases.
- Make longer-term, capacity-building investments to fund leadership development and internal reflection on movement goals and strategy. These funds are as needed in large, national organizations as they are in state and community-based groups. BIPOC-led groups should be prioritized.
- Support groups to hold convenings or engage in coalition-building across geographic divides in order to promote cross-group knowledge-sharing and power-building. Organizations such as the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, Future Coalition, Momentum, the Movement Strategy Center, and Youth Activism Project have successful track records facilitating these gatherings.

- **Organizers should:**

- Continue to innovate in organizational structure in response to emergent needs. Consider developing explicit guidelines about who has decision-making authority and what governs interactions across teams or levels (e.g., national, regional, local). Promote transparency in resource allocation and accountability across entities and priorities. Create mechanisms to solicit confidential and ongoing feedback, including establishing norms of regular reflection on group processes and dynamics.

- For national and state-level groups, strike a balance between providing material support for local chapters or hubs and encouraging their autonomy, particularly as they work to address community-based needs. Make clear what benefits affiliation with the national- or state-level entity affords local hubs, and create communication pathways to incorporate local needs and demands into broader strategy. Create structures or opportunities for local chapters or hubs to learn from one another.
- Keep showing up for one another and supporting one another during difficult times. Use mutual-aid networks, initiate need-based pay, and enroll the help of trained mental health professionals to aid those in crisis and sustain one another in the work.
- Continue exploring ways to center the leadership of communities of color, and of those most impacted by the issues you seek to address. Consider establishing internal affinity groups with power to shape the agenda and messaging to “prevent White people from taking over. Continue collaborating with other organizations, and encourage local chapters to partner with local, community-based SMOs, especially those led by BIPOC elders.
- Fuel one another’s personal growth by creating opportunities for leadership development, such as peer mentoring or workshops and trainings. Continue advocating for stipends to support the work of youth leaders, especially low-income and youth of color.

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Appendix: Organization Profiles

Palmetto Youth Movement

Palmetto Youth Movement (PYM) formed in the summer of 2020 following the disbandment of Youth Climate Action Team's (YCAT) national structure and of U.S. Youth Climate Strike (USYCS). What was then the YCAT Columbia hub merged with the YCAT Myrtle Beach hub, and then with the Carolina Climate Coalition (previously USYCS South Carolina) to establish PYM. PYM formally launched via Instagram Labor Day weekend.

PYM has not yet established a formal theory of change; however, according to one member, people in the organization believe that a "revolution is necessary in order to dismantle the systems that we believe caused [the climate] crisis: capitalism, colonialism, etc." PYM members also want "to create a new world where everyone has what they need, where the Earth is cared for." Other respondents spoke similarly about the root causes of the climate crisis and understood the issue through a social justice lens. The current goals of PYM are building its base, electing progressive South Carolina candidates who are "climate conscious," and getting a Green New Deal for South Carolina. The core principles of PYM are anti-capitalism, community, intersectionality, justice, respect, solidarity, and sustainability. The organization is currently working to establish itself as a 501c(4) so it can engage in lobbying activity.

PYM has approximately 30 members across South Carolina. Although the current executive director is a college student, most of the members are high schoolers, and the group welcomes members aged 13-22.

PYM is organized into multiple teams, including a communications team, a creative team, a fundraising team, a logistics team, and a policy team. Liaisons from each team meet periodically as an executive committee; however, anyone can step into or out of these roles at any time.

At its launch, PYM created several internal documents to promote coordination and shared values across its teams. All new recruits are expected to review and agree to a code of conduct and a statement of core principles. Drawing on resources provided by YCAT, PYM also created a sexual harassment/assault response and prevention (SHARP) policy, outlining how the organization will respond to incidents of harassment and abuse. For its first several months, the organization had a licensed adult counselor on call should any interpersonal disputes arise; however, this resource was discontinued once PYM members felt more confident in their own capacity to address any emergent conflicts.

A key lesson that PYM members drew from their experience with the dissolution of YCAT's national organization and USYCS was to assiduously avoid hierarchical structures. They felt that working at the state level, rather than nationally, would help guard against the emergence of hierarchies that could lead to internal tensions or infighting. At the same time, they embraced state-level organizing as a desirable alternative to national or community-based organizing due to the unique environmental and political challenges South Carolina faces.

PYM provides its progressive and "left-learning" members with a political home in a conservative state. Because it was difficult to identify progressive candidates to support in the runup to the 2020 election, the majority of PYM's activities in its first few months focused on solidifying relationships among group members and establishing a healthy organization, unified by core values and a shared vision. Several members credited PYM with cultivating a strong sense of belonging. One respondent explained that "for people in South Carolina, when we find people that have similar views to ours, I think that we get obviously excited... I think that that mainly is why people keep on coming back." Another shared:

Everyone in this organization has kind of found their people in South Carolina. And I think that it helped us feel like we belong; a lot of us definitely felt like we were kind of alone with our views. I know I definitely felt that way. And finding other people who share your values definitely intertwines with becoming good friends and just having a sense of feeling like you belong with that group of people.

Several members spoke in grateful terms about the supportive space PYM had carved out for them. Until they joined PYM, they had felt isolated because of their views, and they shied away from sharing their thoughts at school or even in their own homes for fear of ridicule or condemnation. PYM, however, offered its members a political refuge and valuable sense of connectedness to others who share their values and hopes for a more sustainable society.

March for Our Lives

March for Our Lives (MfOL) emerged in the aftermath of the February 14, 2018, shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. On March 24, student survivors, supported by more seasoned activists, organized the March for Our Lives, the largest single day of protest against gun violence in history. The primary march took place in Washington, D.C., and attracted an estimated 1.2 to 2 million participants, with 800 sibling marches across the country. At the D.C. event, speakers called for universal background checks on gun sales, raising the age at which one can purchase a firearm, a ban on high-capacity magazines and bump stocks, and the closure of loopholes in the purchase of firearms. In addition, speakers urged young people to register, educate, and vote (REV) at unprecedented levels.

MfOL's strategy of emphasizing voting emerged after a Capitol Hill meeting between the Parkland activists and Senator Chris Murphy (CT), during which he presented them with data on youth voter turnout and issued a challenge to them. Murphy said that while youth voter suppression was structural and intentional, if the Parkland activists could find ways to overcome it, they could change the body politic in such a way that their policy goals might become attainable. Following this meeting, some of the attendees did their own research on youth voter turnout and decided that Senator Murphy was correct: they had a historic opportunity to engage young voters.

Since that time, the movement has grown significantly. Building on the momentum from the march, MfOL undertook a summer tour of the country, the Road to Change, to meet with community leaders, lead town hall events, and register voters. Organizers also worked with mayors to register 800,000 new voters on National Voter Registration Day in September 2018. In 2019, MfOL's work was primarily policy-focused, including advocacy in support of national and state legislation as well as the release of its own comprehensive Peace Plan for a Safer America. With the pandemic, MfOL shifted to digital organizing and unveiled the "Our Power" campaign, which included art to download and share, chapter meetings via zoom, mental health care and domestic violence resources, best practices to prevent accidental shootings in the home, and various appeals to "get out the vote."

The MfOL national organization is composed of both a 501c(3) education arm and a 401c(4) action fund. It is governed by a nine-member board composed of four youth organizers and five adult advisors. MfOL national also employs nine directors leading departments such as organizing, communications, operations, and development, as well as a four-person policy team focused on state and federal advocacy. Regional directors from the national organizing team oversee state boards, with one representative from each chapter in a given state. MfOL's base is composed of 300 volunteer chapters across the country, and its Youth Congress helps to ensure the movement remains youth-led as it expands. The Youth Congress is composed of youth activists from across the country who

collectively advise on MfOL strategy and direction. Youth Congress members also lead committees on advocacy, ARTivism, and social media, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Although the original group of Parkland activists who were featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine were predominantly white, the organization has diversified its leadership and its messaging considerably over the last three years. Presently, 95% of the 21-member Youth Congress identify as people of color. Furthermore, the original leaders quickly moved away from an initial call for “hardening” schools, as they learned how such policies fuel the school-to-prison pipeline and make students of color less safe. By the time of the march in Washington, D.C., they were sharing the stage with BIPOC youth from Chicago, Los Angeles, and Brooklyn. In their press appearances and town hall events, they were speaking more critically about the root causes of gun violence, the disproportionate impact of gun violence on low-income people of color, and the prevalence of everyday gun violence in under-resourced communities.

This is not to say that, as an organization, MfOL did not continue to struggle with issues of diversity and inclusion; however, the early work organizers did to confront their own privilege and examine gun violence through a critical, intersectional lens paved the way for the organization to respond swiftly and thoughtfully to the murder of George Floyd. While this event served as a profound shock to the conscience and call to action for many young people across the U.S., including many of the MfOL chapter members, it did not demand a significant shift in course from MfOL national because the organization had already been connecting the dots between police violence and gun violence for years. In their 2019 Peace Plan for a Safer America, they devoted a section to police violence, writing:

We cannot talk about gun violence in communities without talking about our national challenges with police violence. Officer-involved shootings are now a leading cause of death for young American men. While police violence both contributes to, and is influenced by, weak gun laws, we also need structural reforms that directly produce better policing.

Within weeks of George Floyd’s murder, staff from MfOL had created content on the organization’s website related to BLM, including resources for protestors, ways to take action from home given the exigencies of the pandemic, places to donate, and opportunities to demand justice for Breonna Taylor. Even as the organization has grown and those at the helm have changed, MfOL remains nimble, capable of responding to the moment with a voice that galvanizes and resonates with its base.

Youth Climate Action Team

The Youth Climate Action Team (YCAT) is a youth-led social movement organization fighting for climate justice. YCAT was founded in early 2019 by a group of high school students from Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They held their first climate protest on March 15, 2019, attended by over 2,000 young people across the state. By September of 2019, they had expanded to include seven Wisconsin hubs. Their second climate protest, in September 2019, drew over 2,000 in Madison alone and thousands more across the state, making it the largest climate mobilization in Wisconsin history. YCAT’S principal founder and first executive director was a queer woman of color, and the group aimed to be intersectional, anticapitalist, and antiracist from its founding.

In early 2020, YCAT began to consider a national expansion and created a comprehensive Membership Program that all new members and hub leaders must sign and adhere to. YCAT announced its national expansion in May 2020. However, following an experience of online harassment directed at a founding member, YCAT decided to disband its national structure and return

to a statewide coalition. Even as YCAT transitioned back to a state-level organization, it provided resources and ongoing support, including sample SHARP policies and statements of principles, to non-Wisconsin based groups that had applied to start YCAT hubs.

In addition to nonviolent direct action, YCAT organizers work to reduce harm to vulnerable populations through community-building and education. For example, YCAT worked with other local groups to purchase land for a community garden to help address food insecurity in Madison. YCAT youth organizers have also participated in mutual aid in response to the social and economic insecurity of the COVID-19 pandemic. The group is intentionally intersectional in its approach, believing it is imperative to center the needs, voices, and experiences of those most impacted by climate injustice. In the wake of police killings of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor in summer 2020, YCAT organized a series of panels to increase awareness. While YCAT members strive to meet the immediate needs of those most marginalized in their communities, YCAT's primary long-term goal is to build a base of parallel coalitions to mobilize the majority of the workforce for a general strike by 2030.

Though YCAT as an organization does not center voting within its theory of change, members and leaders participated in an array of electoral activities in the lead up to the 2020 election. YCAT partnered with an organization called 350 Madison in efforts to get out the vote. They also sponsored panels with local candidates, aided a Wisconsin-based campaign effort, and individual members reported participating in phone banking campaigns with other groups. One respondent felt that, whatever their individual opinions about voting, all YCAT members were "on the same page" that voting and getting others to vote in the 2020 election would "be a catalyst for change."

YCAT members credit the detrimental impacts of climate change for lending a sense of urgency to their work. However, it is a deep sense of belonging that keeps them involved and sustained in this work. In the words of one respondent, "It's easy to want to show up and make change when you know you're doing it with your friends." Indeed, members interviewed for this project tended to describe YCAT as an "open environment" where they feel respected, heard, and appreciated. "One of the things that I really love about YCAT is how open everybody is to hearing other members' ideas," one member said. "Even if it's an idea that might not really work out logistically, members will always be sure to say, like, 'you know, good idea. Thanks for sharing that; we love to hear it.'" In all, members converged in their descriptions of YCAT as an open, inclusive, and supportive space. By emphasizing inclusion and promoting personal growth, YCAT creates spaces for young people to experiment and work together toward their vision of a more just world.

Sunrise Movement

Sunrise Movement was founded in 2017 to combat the climate crisis. Meeting through college-campus fossil fuel divestment movements, Sunrise's founders sought to build a popular mandate for political action on the climate crisis. The movement aims to "build people power and political power simultaneously to pass a Green New Deal and to create millions of good wage jobs" in the process. Since gaining national attention for their 2018 sit-in at Nancy Pelosi's office, the organization has grown to include hundreds of hubs across the country, with a national presence that coordinates overarching strategy, facilitates trainings, and supports hub work. Drawing lessons from youth movements of the past, Sunrise employs a variety of nonviolent tactics aimed at building a popular mandate for political action to address climate change.

With over 100,000 members and both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) elements, Sunrise Movement is structured around a "snowflake model of distributed leadership." The aim of this structure is to create a decentralized, self-organized movement composed primarily of autonomous, volunteer-based hubs. At the core of the organization are an executive director and four division directors overseeing communications, politics & partnerships, organizing, and operations. A steering committee consisting

of the executive director, representatives from each division, and three at-large staff members coordinates strategic decision-making across national divisions, each of which oversees numerous departments. Additional clusters of leaders and members surround this national core. These are the 470 active Sunrise hubs located in cities, towns, and schools across the country. Within each of these hubs, in theory, there is another decentralized core of leaders surrounded by members with specific operational and tactical foci, such as communications, recruitment, or political strategy. Any three individuals can start a hub after taking an action and going through Sunrise's onboarding process for new hub leaders, which includes a review of Sunrise's core principles and relational organizing activities.

During the 2018 midterms, Sunrise pressured politicians to forgo donations from fossil fuel companies and engaged in political advocacy through endorsements, phone banking, and get-out-the-vote efforts. They continued this work in the 2020 election cycle, deploying five voter contact tactics: peer-to-peer texting, postcards, phone-banking, relational organizing, and vote tripling to reach 6.5 million voters. The movement initially endorsed Senator Bernie Sanders' primary campaign for President. Though Senator Sanders did not win the Democratic nomination, Sunrise's electoral efforts helped propel, among others, Senator Ed Markey (MA), Representative Jamaal Bowman (NY-16), and Representative Cori Bush (MO-01) to wins in their competitive primaries. After President Biden won the Democratic nomination, Sunrise founder and Executive Director Varshini Prakash was invited to join the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force on Climate Change, where she helped advocate for progressive changes to Biden's climate plan. Sunrise's national organization also endorsed 19 general election candidates who supported the Green New Deal, while hubs often made additional endorsements at the local level. Ten of the general election candidates endorsed by Sunrise national went on to win their elections, including one U.S. Senator and nine members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Though Sunrise never officially endorsed President Biden's candidacy, the movement mobilized its members to engage in mass voter contact efforts to support him and spearheaded digital ad campaigns in numerous swing states.

In summer 2020, Sunrise also engaged its members in discussions and actions in response to the national awakening on systemic racism. They hosted trainings on the relationship between racial justice and climate justice, discussed ways for members to support the Movement for Black Lives, and offered staff support for Black Lives Matter digital organizing campaigns. In 2020, Sunrise issued a set of Justice, Equity, and Anti-Oppression (JEO) priorities for their movement.

In the fall of 2020, Sunrise's founders issued a joint letter stating their intentions to step back from their leadership roles to make room for a new generation of young leaders. As Sunrise moves into the last phase of its five-phase Green New Deal Strategy in the wake of the 2020 elections, the movement plans to continue shaping the national conversation on the climate crisis and advocating for the Biden-Harris Administration and Congressional Democrats to prioritize and pass a Green New Deal. At the time of writing, Sunrise staff were reviewing lessons learned and potential directions for the organization's goals, structure, and strategy going forward.

GoodKids MadCity

GoodKids MadCity (GKMC) formed in the wake of the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, FL. The idea to form GoodKids MadCity emerged as young people of color from Baltimore and Chicago, who experienced gun violence in their daily lives, built connections with one another at the first March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. Being together at the march inspired these founding members to organize black youth to combat everyday gun violence. As one member said:

We established GoodKids MadCity so that there could be a group that someone could understand and relate to, that someone knew was out there fighting for them and fighting for [people] like us. And I think that's like what drives GoodKids MadCity, knowing that we are the voice to people who feel voiceless, and we are the vision for people who don't see an out.

After their initial conversations at the 2018 March for Our Lives, GKMC organizers established chapters in Chicago and Baltimore and began working in parallel to strengthen, heal, and support their communities.

GKMC's structure is intentionally "leaderless." Organizers describe a distributed model of leadership where all members are recognized and welcomed as leaders with unique talents and strengths. GKMC Baltimore, which participated in our research, has six co-leads, three co-founders, and two co-executive directors. Yet, respondents described these titles as being roles in name only. In practice, each individual is empowered to take ownership over and influence the tactical direction of the organization. "We're all leaders within this organization, and we're all organizers with our own sets of talents and skills," a GKMC Baltimore co-executive director explained.

Inclusion, mentorship, and leadership development are core to GKMC's organizational culture. These values are informed by the problems GKMC organizers seek to address, which they understand to be "multifaceted." As one GKMC Baltimore member told us, if addressing the root causes of gun violence means confronting food insecurity, unemployment, education deficits, and structural racism, then "you prioritize diversity; you prioritize inclusion, [because you] can't afford to look at it from a single scope." Thus, more than any specific operational role, being a leader in GKMC means being someone who lifts up others. "A leader is one who enables other leaders to be just that, a great leader," one member explained.

GKMC's understanding of gun violence as a symptom of systemic inequities also informs the organizing activities the SMO pursues. GKMC members use social media and personal networks to spread knowledge about community resources, and they strive to provide safe spaces to heal from trauma. GKMC also organizes mutual aid networks to meet their communities' immediate needs. They do this by amplifying the specific needs of individuals and families via social media, as well as hosting and supporting food and supply drives. The Chicago chapter also offers both housing-specific and general-purpose micro-grants to individuals and their families. The general-purpose grants can cover everything from groceries to bus money.

As part of its endeavor to provide wrap-around services to community members, GKMC builds coalitions with other local organizations. GKMC Chicago has used those partnerships to create youth and workforce development programs. One of its newest endeavors is its "W.E. Got This" campaign, which aims "to begin imagining and implementing a plan to create Black-owned businesses in the West Englewood neighborhood." Baltimore has partnered with Ceasefire 365 to support regular Ceasefire Weekends and organize community building events around them. They also work hard to promote underutilized resources that are already available to community members.

GKMC is locally focused: changing the world one person and one community at a time. To that end, the Chicago and Baltimore chapters support each other's organizing activities while developing programs specific to their respective communities' needs. To amplify each other's work, they coordinate parallel events, such as vigils remembering and honoring those killed by gun violence.

Although their experiences and history make many members of GKMC skeptical of putting their hopes in politicians, they are savvy about the role politics plays in their communities. They call out politicians and policies that hurt their communities, and they have been a prominent voice in calls to defund and abolish the police through social media, rallies, and protests. At the same time, they also

advocate for new policies. In Chicago, GKMC has developed the Peace Book ordinance, which lays out a holistic plan to address gun violence that includes access to resources and restorative justice practices. The Chicago chapter has been raising funds to promote the Peace Book, and it is calling for the Chicago City Council to adopt it.

At the heart of everything GKMC does is a faith in their communities and a celebration of being in community with each other. “It only takes one person to touch another person,” a GKMC Baltimore member told us. “If you can do that, then you've made a difference, even if it is just to that person.” It is this lifting up of one another, GKMC believes, that will create real change in their communities.

