



A NEW DECADE of Girls' Leadership

A 2020 Report by the Girl Scout Research Institute
Updated January 2021

The Vote is In:

What youth think about the gender gap in politics

A NEW DECADE of Girls' Leadership

The Vote is In:

What youth think about the gender gap in politics

This report is the first in a two-part series examining how girls define, experience, and aspire towards leadership in their current and future lives. As a refresh of GSRI's 2008 study [*Change It Up! What Girls Think About Redefining Leadership*](#), the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) conducted a survey with a national sample of young people ages 8–21. ¹

The current report examines young people's thoughts and beliefs about gender, politics, and civic engagement, asking the following questions:

- ✓ What are young people's beliefs about gender and political leadership?
- ✓ What do girls think about the gender gap in political representation, and what do they think we should do to address it?
- ✓ Where and how are girls engaging civically and politically?
- ✓ How do girls want to lead in this space, and what are their aspirations and career interests? What issues do they care about, and what impact do they want to make in the world?

1- Methodology

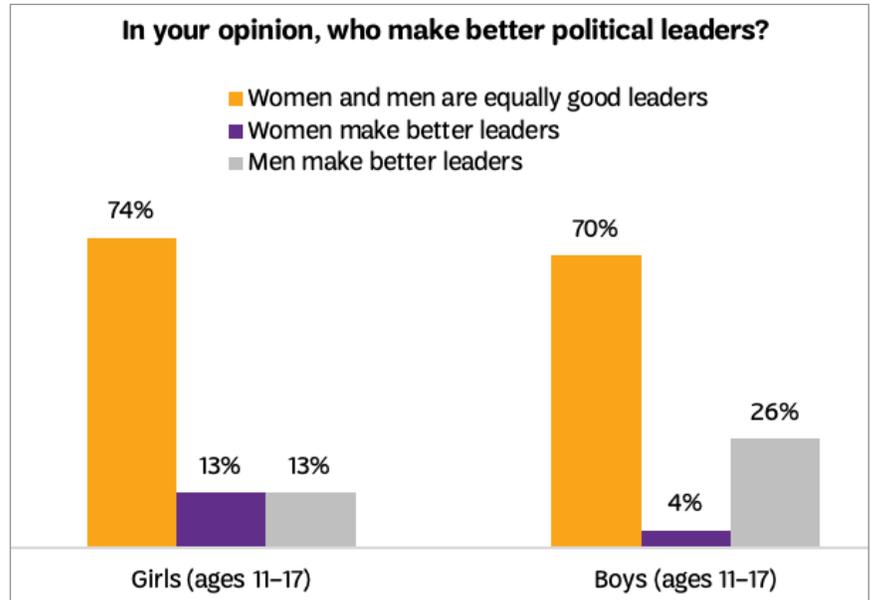
In May of 2020, the Girl Scout Research Institute partnered with Qualtrics to conduct a national survey with ~3000 girls/young women ages 8–21 and ~1000 boys/young men ages 8–21; samples were equally distributed across age ranges (middle childhood ages 8–10, early adolescence 11–13, adolescence 14–17, early adulthood 18–21). While respondents could indicate their gender as male, female, or nonbinary, statistically speaking, there were too few nonbinary respondents to include in the gender comparisons in this report. Responses were collected to be nationally representative for household income and race/ethnicity nested inside of gender—each sample was 53% White, 15% Black or African American, 20% Latinx, 7% Asian, 4% Multiracial, <1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and <1% Other. Girl respondents were both Girl Scouts (16%) and non-Girl Scouts (84%).

1 What do today's young people believe about gender and political leadership?

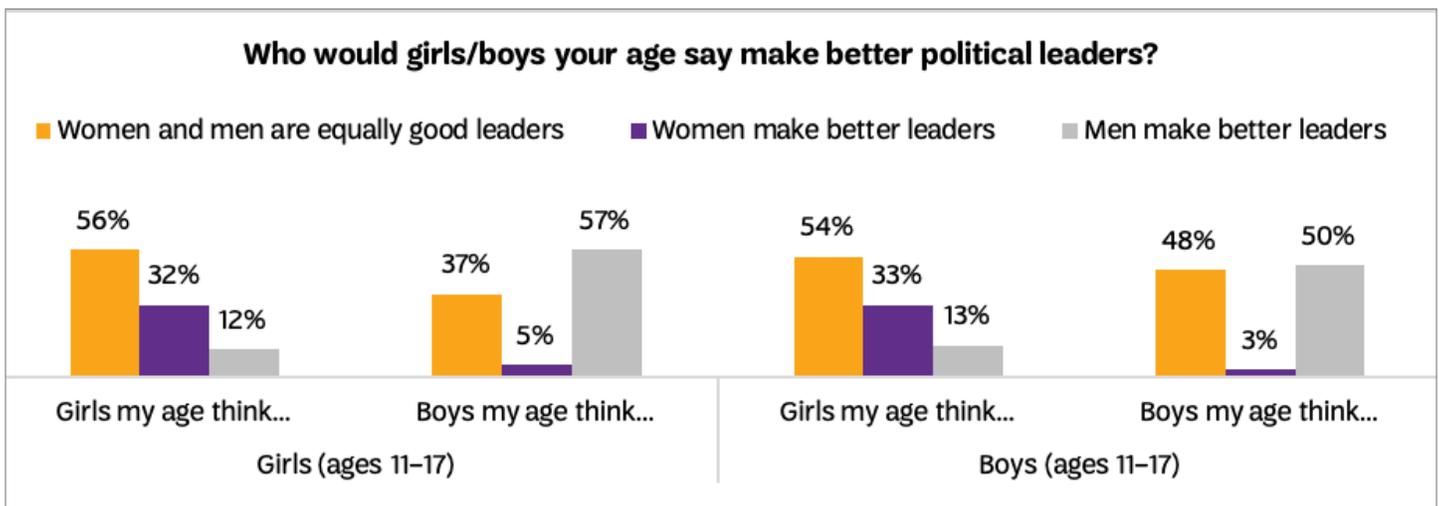
More than 7 in 10 girls and boys have egalitarian views of gender and political leadership—meaning they believe women and men make equally good political leaders.

Among those 11–17 who don't hold egalitarian views, girls are split in their preference for women or men (13% vs. 13%) as leaders, while boys tend to prefer men over women (26% vs. 4%).

Compared to a [2008 GSRI study](#), the percentage of girls who think men make better political leaders has decreased from 17% to 13%—indicating girls' increased confidence in women's power to lead!



However, girls and boys are not as likely to believe their peers hold egalitarian views about effective political leadership. While more young people in our study believe their female peers hold egalitarian views compared to their male peers, they also assume many of their peers prefer political leaders of their own gender. One-third of both girls and boys thought girls favored women as leaders; in reality, only 13% did. Both girls and boys believed that 50% or more of boys thought men made better leaders; but when surveyed, only 26% thought that. *Girls believe 56% of other girls have egalitarian beliefs, but that only 37% of boys hold the same views—when compared to what youth actually think, girls underestimate the number of girls who hold egalitarian beliefs by 18 percentage points and boys by 33 percentage points.*

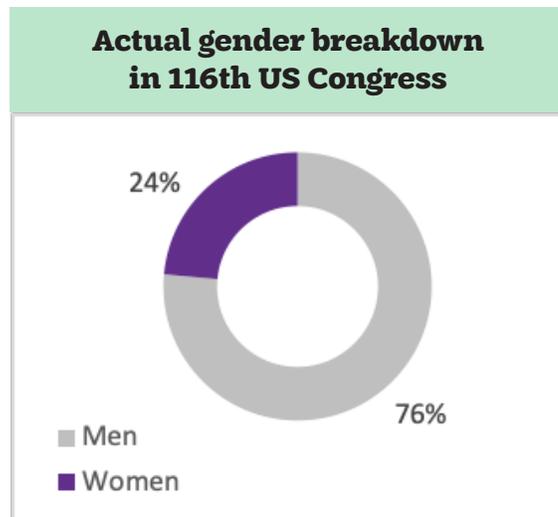


2 What do young people think about the gender gap in political representation?

Girls want to close the congressional gender gap

“Women deserve an equal opportunity in government positions because political decisions affect EVERYONE regardless of gender.” (Age 18, California)²

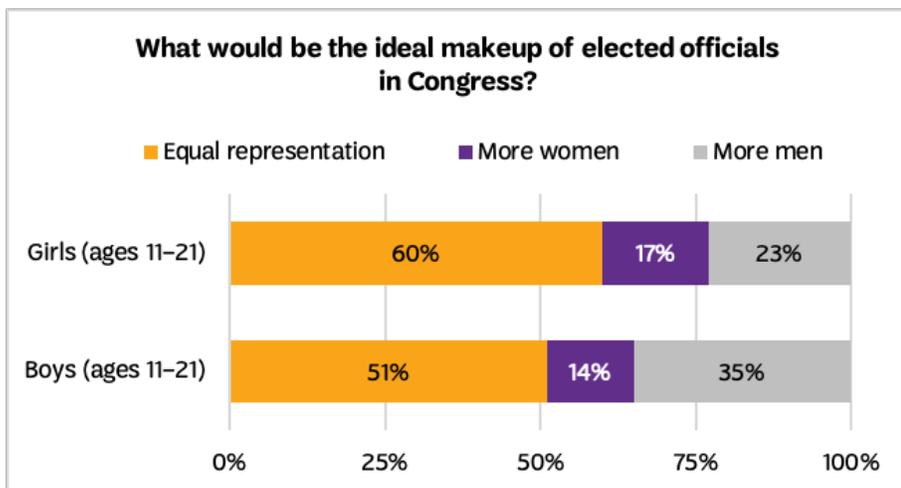
3 in 4 girls/young women (ages 11–21) accurately judge that the current Congress is comprised of more men than women.³ However, nearly two-thirds misjudge the size of the gender disparity, on average overestimating the proportion of women by about 10 percentage points: whereas the 116th Congress is 24% women, on average, girls assumed Congress is comprised of 35% women.



What do girls think we should do about this disparity?

86% of girls/young women who believe Congress underrepresents women would increase the number of women elected (as would 77% of boys/young men).

In a scenario where young people were asked to determine the ideal gender balance of elected officials, 77% of girls/young women and 65% of boys/young men wanted women to be equally represented or overrepresented in Congress. *The proportion of those who want equal representation increases among those with egalitarian views of leadership.*



There should be a near equal amount of men and women in Congress because this would more accurately represent the population. We need to speak more to the public about how we can change this and the importance of being active in the community and voting.” (Age 18, Texas)

2 - All quotes in this report are from girls/ young women.

3 - Respondents were given slider bars representing the percentage of women and men in Congress—proportions were required to sum to 100%. This same design was used to assess young people’s beliefs about the ideal state of Congress. Given that no current member of Congress openly identifies as gender nonconforming or nonbinary, only men and women were used as gender terms.

3 Young people are ready to shatter the highest glass ceiling.

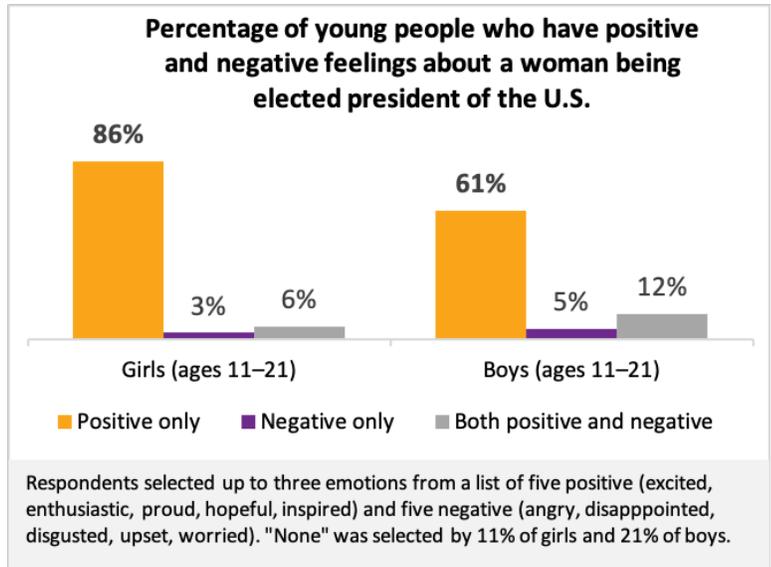
Today's young people want to see a woman in the Oval Office.

Nearly 9 in 10 girls/young women and 6 in 10 boys/young men would feel positive about a woman being elected as president of the United States.

Girls say they would feel proud (66%), inspired (55%), hopeful (45%), excited (41%), and/or enthusiastic (31%).

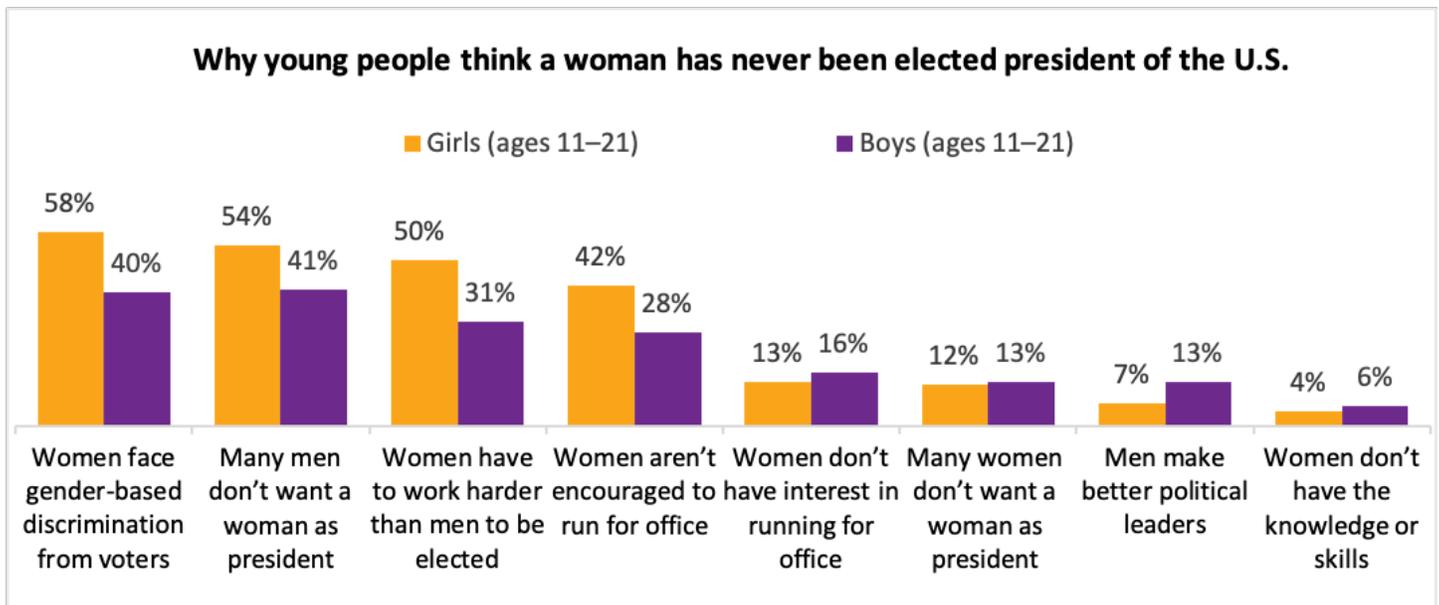
"It would mean that I could be president someday too if I wanted to." (Age 11, New Jersey)

"I would finally feel that women are looked upon equally in the political environment." (Age 16, California)



Young people are aware of the challenges that still exist for women in politics.

84% of girls (ages 11-21) and **73%** of boys (ages 11-21) identify systemic inequalities, like gender-based discrimination, as reasons women have not yet achieved the office of the presidency.⁴ Far fewer girls or boys attribute this gap to women's interest in running or aptitude for politics.



4 - Youth could select as many reasons as applied. Systemic inequality percentages represent youth who selected at least one of the following: women face gender-based discrimination from voters, men don't want a woman as president, women have to work harder to be elected, women aren't encouraged to run for office

4 To address the gender gap in politics, girls/young women advise we should:

Encourage girls to think of themselves as leaders and provide them with opportunities to practice leadership—this includes addressing gender stereotypes about who can be a leader

“Girls should be encouraged when they are younger to think of themselves as future leaders, and boys should be taught that girls are just as good as them.” (Age 12, Mississippi)

“Girls should be encouraged more in school to take on leadership roles. This should start at an early age and continue throughout college.” (Age 13, California)

“Make equality a more important thing in schools and try to prevent gender stereotyping.” (Age 15, Nebraska)

Teach all children –including boys—about the importance of gender equality and making space for women and girls

“Reform education so that children don’t grow up with [gender] stereotypes. There would then be less stigma against women in politics or leadership roles.” (Age 16, New York)

“Kids in schools should learn about influential women. We hardly ever learn about women in positions of power, and that may lead us to assume that women cannot be politically powerful.” (Age 21, Maryland)

“There needs to be more inclusion in politics. Breaking the patriarchal traditions of the past [is] necessary to move forward with women/girls feeling more empowered.” (Age 16, Hawaii)

Provide girls with role models who encourage them and ensure access to civic education to increase girls’ interest and knowledge

“Encourage girls to take an interest in [politics], and not . . . be afraid that they don’t belong there.” (Age 19, Maryland)

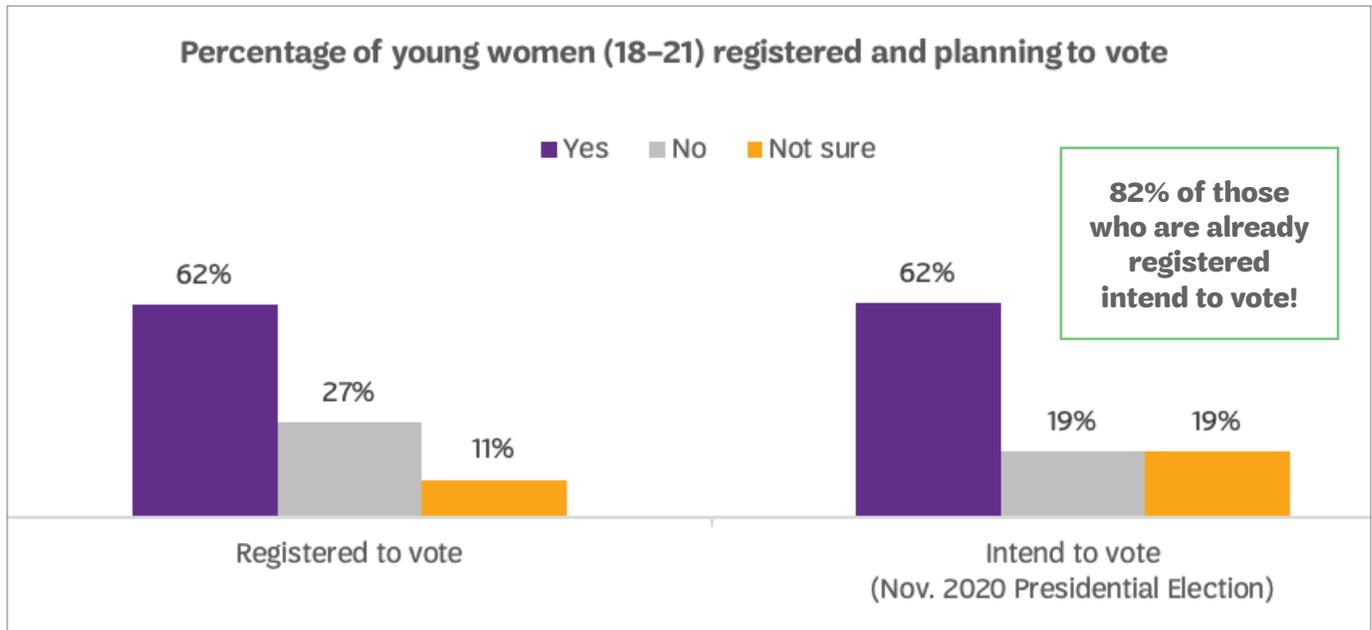
“Women should be informed about government jobs when they’re younger, so more are inspired to be involved in politics.” (Age 17, California)

“More role models. Girls stray from politics and leadership because it is majority men.” (Age 17, California)

Research shows that in the USA, only 1 in 4 [8th grade students](#) are sufficiently knowledgeable in civics, and even [among adults](#), only 39% could name all three branches of government while 22% could not name any. Civics education doesn’t just teach students how their government works—it also helps them see the important roles they can play, now and in the future! To close the gender gap, children and teens of all genders need civics education that breaks down stereotypes about women and girls in leadership and teaches the importance of gender inclusion in government. That’s why in August 2020, Girl Scouts introduced [a line of new democracy badges](#) for girls in K–12 that help girls learn about our government and offer opportunities to participate in civics-inspired activities!

5 How are girls and young women engaging politically?

The vote is in! 6 in 10 young women of voting age intend to vote in the November 2020 election—and 8 in 10 of those who are registered intend to vote.



Young women who intend to vote...

- ✓ **Are more politically engaged.** 61% of young women who intend to vote in the upcoming election talk to their friends about politics or social issues “sometimes” or “often,” compared to 50% of those who don’t intend to vote. Those who intend to vote are also more likely to have contacted their elected officials (22% vs. 13%).
- ✓ **Want to close the gender gap.** 73% want to increase the proportion of women in Congress compared to 58% of those who don’t intend to vote or are not sure if they’ll vote.

Demographic differences in who intends to vote indicate a need to ensure equal access to voting!

- **Fewer women who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) intend to vote (59%) compared to White women (66%);** however, among those already registered, this difference narrows to 80% and 84%.
- **Women from lower-income households are less likely to intend to vote.** 58% of women from households earning less than \$50k intend to vote, compared to 64% from households earning \$50k to \$99k and 73% from households earning \$100k or more.

Voting is arguably our most important civic duty—but barriers still exist. In many parts of the country, voting laws and protocols make it difficult for many people, especially people of color, to cast their votes in local and federal elections. In other words, there’s work to be done—and girls can play a part. That’s why, in September 2020, Girl Scouts launched a nonpartisan national [“Promote the Vote”](#) initiative to engage Girl Scouts in the democratic process.

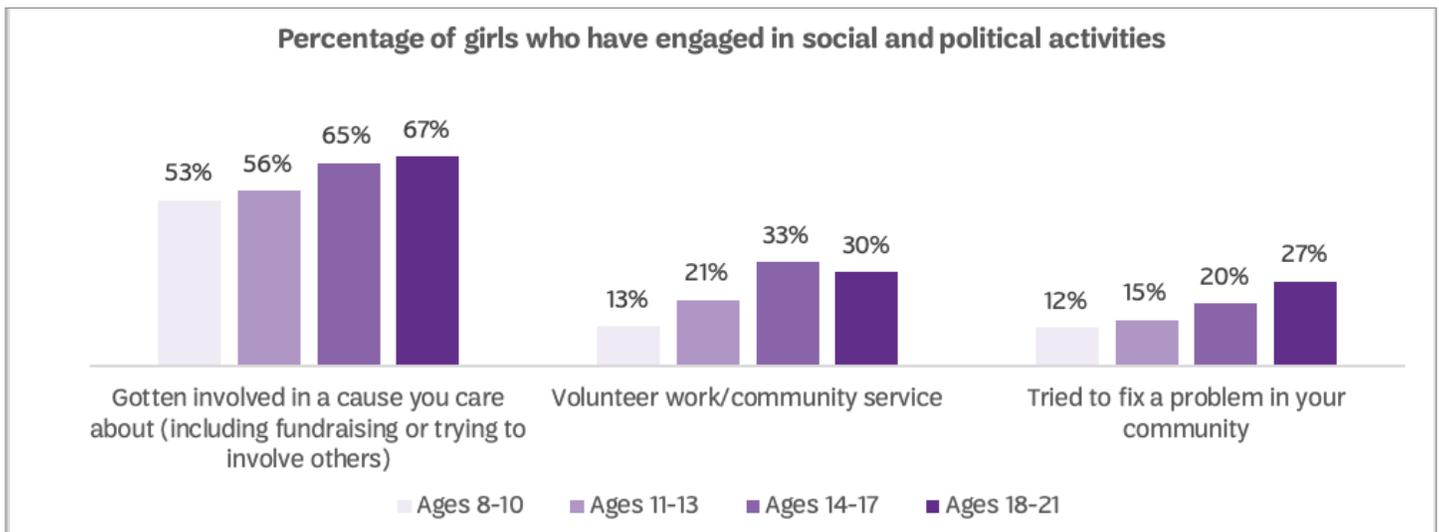
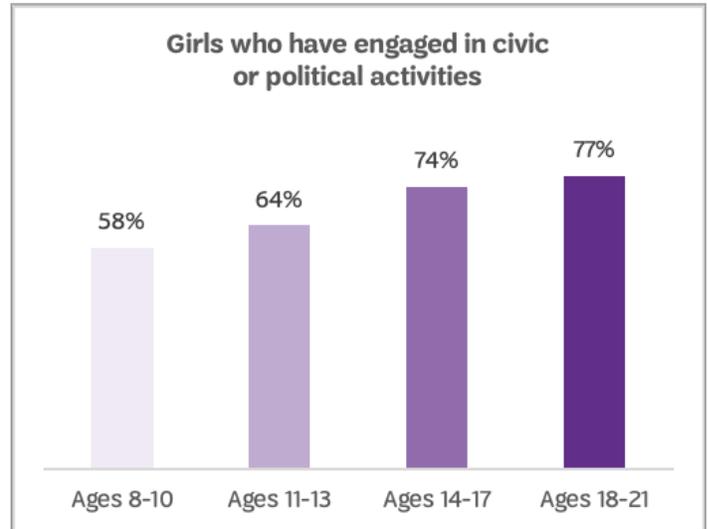
6 Girls of all ages are finding ways to civically engage and take action!

More than 2/3 of girls and young women (68%) have engaged in civic or political activities by getting involved in causes they care about, supporting their local communities through volunteer work, or reaching out to engage their elected officials.

Engagement increases with age—teenagers and young adults were more likely to engage civically, compared to younger girls.

Girls (ages 8–17) also have experience with a variety of school-based or extracurricular leadership experiences:

- ✓ 7 in 10 have held leadership roles in after-school groups or organizations (e.g., honor society, sports team)
- ✓ 1 in 10 have participated in student government or a student-based political organization (6% ages 8–10 | 9% ages 11–13 | 10% ages 14–17)



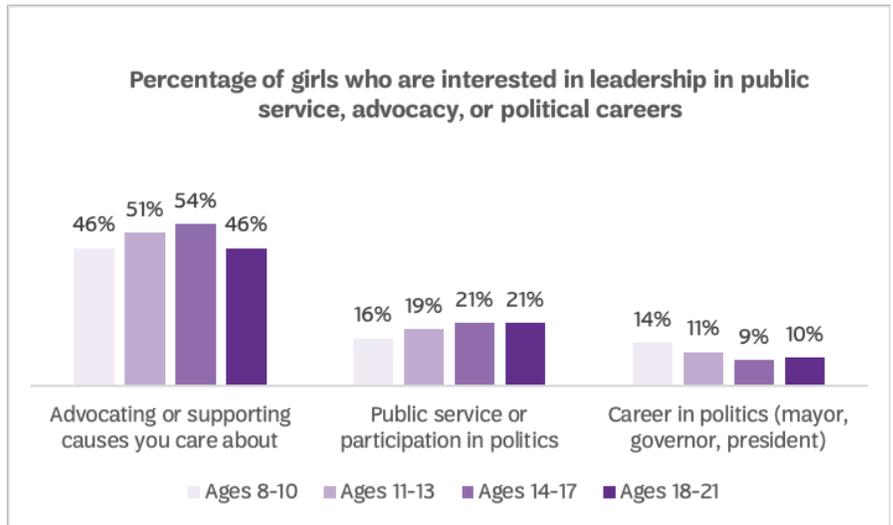
Most girls say they discuss social issues or politics with their families (61%) or friends (50%) at least sometimes.

- The number of girls who discuss social or political issues with friends increases through high school before leveling off (35% ages 8–10 | 48% ages 11–13 | 58% ages 14–21).
- Talking about social and political issues isn't just important for understanding the world—it is also linked to taking action. Girls who talk about social and political issues are more likely to have engaged in social or political action than those who never talk about such issues (75% vs. 52%).
- And talking about social issues might be an indicator of whether girls feel their voices are valued! Girls who talk about social issues and politics with their families are more likely to feel their parents and teachers encourage them to be leaders than those who talk about these topics less frequently—and this is true for peers as well! Girls who talk about social issues with friends also feel more encouraged to be leaders overall.

7 And looking into the future, girls want to take the lead in public service and advocacy!

Nearly **6 in 10** girls and young women (59%) are interested in being a future leader through advocacy, public service, or a career as an elected official (i.e., as a mayor, governor, or president).

Girls who express an interest in public service, advocacy, or politics are our future change makers — they are more likely to agree that in the future they'll have the power or ability to influence or change things in their community than those who are not interested in these careers.

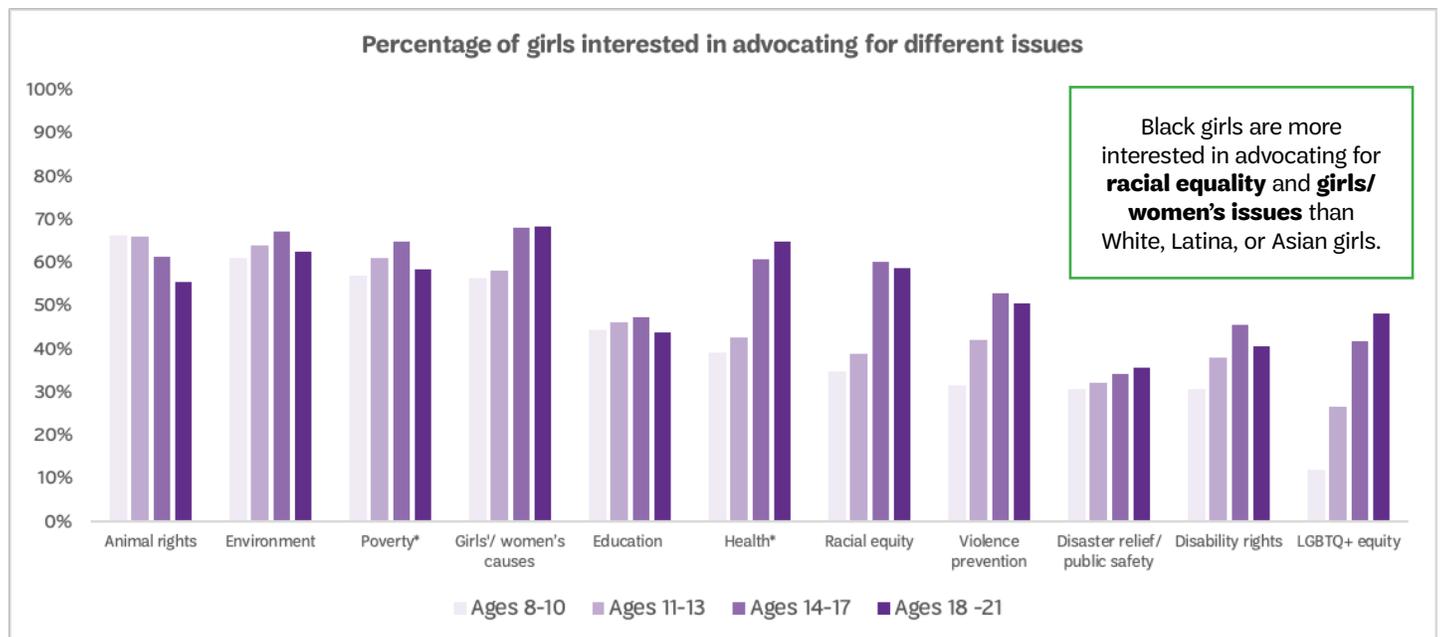


Regardless of the careers they choose, girls want to make a difference.

- 87% of girls are concerned about gender parity and think it is important that employees are paid equally, regardless of gender. As discussed in our [entrepreneurship report](#), this is particularly important, given [research](#) that shows women make between 81 and 92 cents for every dollar that men make, and [this gap widens](#) for Black, Latina, and Indigenous women!
- 86% think it is important that in their future workplace, everyone is treated equally
- 82% want to make a positive impact on society through their future work.

Girls are interested in advocating for a variety of causes and issues.

GenZ has been called the activist generation, so it is no surprise that nearly 1 in 2 girls are interested in leading advocacy efforts in support of causes or issues they care about. Among youth who want to lead in advocacy, girls care most about the environment and equality and human rights issues or causes (e.g., girl's and women's issues, LGBTQ equity, racial equity, disability rights, poverty).



*Poverty, food insecurity, homelessness *Healthcare, mental health, public health

Just as past GSRI research has shown that girls are ready to close the opportunity gap in areas ranging from [entrepreneurship](#) to STEM and [cybersecurity](#), the current study shows that both girls and boys are ready to close the gender gap in civic and political leadership. And Girl Scouts can help!

[Our research shows](#) that in Girl Scouts, guided by strong and supportive adult role models, girls practice hands-on, everyday leadership as they earn badges in topics ranging from civics and democracy to the environment. Girl Scouts helps girls develop the skills they need to take the lead—including taking action in their communities on issues they're passionate about.

The next chapter of this research will provide additional insight into how girls want to take the lead—and how adults and youth organizations can support them in achieving their goals!



This research is brought to you by the generous support of the The David and Lura Lovell Foundation.

The **Girl Scout Research Institute** conducts original research on girls' healthy development, well-being, and leadership. Learn more at www.girlscouts.org/research.

The Girl Scout Research Institute
Girl Scouts of the USA
420 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10018
gsresearch@girlscouts.org

