



O'BRIEN • GARRETT

# COVID-19, ELECTIONS, AND DONORS

AN O'BRIEN GARRETT RESEARCH REPORT  
OCTOBER 2020

## Introduction

Since April, O'Brien Garrett has been exploring how the multiple crises of 2020 are impacting donors and their giving decisions, and using that information to help our clients navigate this fast-moving and extremely challenging year. This memo summarizes the findings of the third and final pre-election installment of our research series.

Our series started out focused on COVID-19 and its early impacts on donors' health and finances. But this has been a difficult year in multiple dimensions. So, over time, we expanded our research to explore many additional issues and their interplay with one another.

Our September survey was conducted after the death of Justice Ginsburg but prior to the President's COVID-19 diagnosis. The survey was fielded online and included 650 responses. As in our other studies, those respondents are reflective of a broad direct response donor audience. We qualified people based on demographics and their giving behavior using the same methodology as previous surveys.

While the overall study contains data on a wide range of direct response donors, including those who give to more mainstream or apolitical organizations, the study oversamples progressive donors. We have chosen to focus this report on the dynamics of the progressive donor community. But where the broader donor community differs significantly, we have noted that difference. We have also noted areas where monthly donors and midlevel donors diverge in their opinions from the overall audience. However, those areas tend to be around people's confidence in their future giving behavior and financial security rather than issue- or priority-based.

Our report is in three parts. As a reminder of where things stood three months ago, we begin by noting a few key highlights from our June survey. We then present the most significant data from the current survey. Our report concludes with a series of recommendations for how organizations might act on the survey's findings as we all prepare to navigate an unprecedented post-election and year-end giving climate.

## A Note on Defining Progressive Donors

Before we delve into the data, a quick note on how we defined respondents as progressive donors. To be counted in our progressive donor sample, respondents had to meet two criteria. They had to self-identify as either "progressive" or "moderate." They also had to report giving to one of the organizations listed in the chart below — organizations with large direct response programs.

ACLU	Planned Parenthood
Sierra Club	NRDC
Everytown for Gun Safety	NAACP
Human Rights Campaign	Southern Poverty Law Center
NPR	MSF
Oxfam	Amnesty International

The demographics of our progressive survey audience fall into line with what we know about progressive direct response audiences.

- 37% over 50 years old
- 51% women / 49% men / 2% transgender, nonbinary, or gender queer
- 50% earn more than \$100,000 per year
- 58% Democrat / 22% Republican / 16% Independent

It is also noteworthy that the progressive donor audience is majority urban. Fifty-five percent of progressives live in urban areas. In our earlier tracking surveys, we saw differing perceptions about COVID-19 between urban and more rural audiences. But over time, those attitudes have converged, and there are fewer places where the fact that someone is an urban donor makes a difference.

## Key Highlights from Our June Survey Findings

Before turning to the current survey data, we should quickly note four key elements in the state of play we found when we surveyed direct response donors back in June.

### **#1: Stress and anxiety had overwhelmed economic impact.**

In April, as an indication of the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis, 35 percent of donors reported at least a temporary reduction in their income. Two months later, that number had dropped to 25 percent. But as the crisis persisted, more and more people were struggling with stress and anxiety — a reality all of us can understand from our own personal experiences.

### **#2: In spite of facing some financial challenges, donors were really stretching to meet the moment.**

In one of the most interesting and encouraging dynamics of 2020, we saw clear evidence that donors were tending to set aside any financial uncertainty they might be experiencing and really digging deep to keep donating. For many, that included continuing to support the causes they care about, adding new causes to the list, and responding to needs in their local community.

### **#3: In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, racial justice was becoming a top priority issue for donors.**

Our June survey was fielded not long after the murder of George Floyd and the emergence of enormous protests and calls for racial justice. That movement for Black lives sparked

a surge that elevated racial justice as a top priority for donors. As we'll see in the current survey data, the sharp focus on racial justice as a high priority has endured over time.

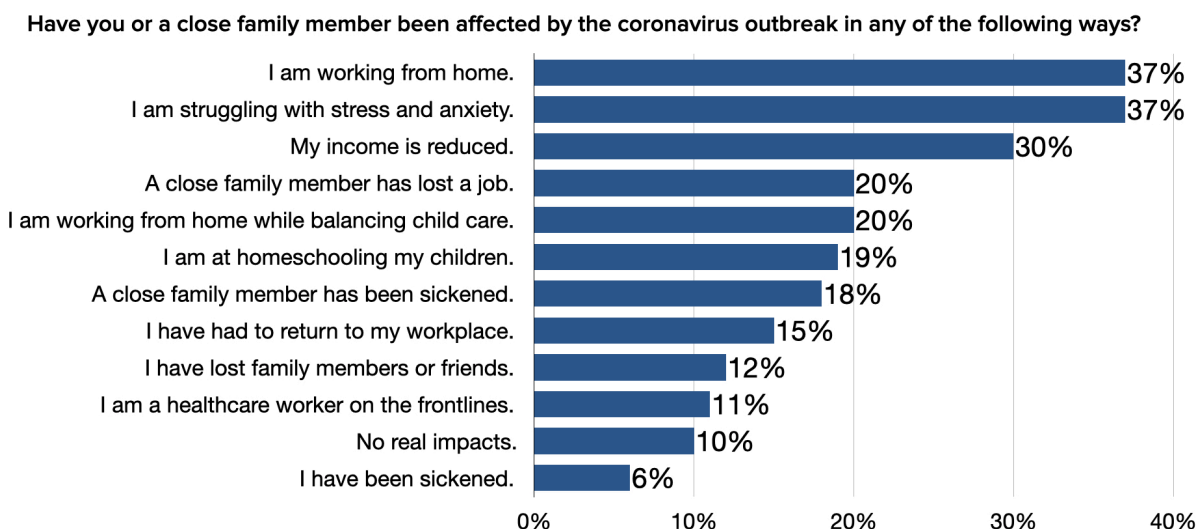
#### **#4: Donors expressed an extraordinary level of interest in the 2020 elections.**

Even back in June, donors were expressing very high levels of concern and interest in the outcome of the election, reporting close following of the contest far earlier in the election cycle than we have seen in prior presidential years.

## **The Current Survey: Key Findings**

### **#1: As the crisis persists, it is taking a heavy toll on donors' mental health.**

It would be difficult to overstate the high level of stress and anxiety that donors are experiencing as they navigate through the multiple crises of 2020. You can see that reality running through their responses to a question about how the coronavirus outbreak is impacting the respondent or a close family member.



Nearly 4 out of 10 donors report that they are struggling with stress and anxiety. Thirty-seven percent are working from home, and more than half of those are balancing work from home and child care.

Thirty percent of donors have seen their income reduced. And as the crisis goes on, more and more people are seeing the health impacts in their own lives. They've lost people who are close to them. They know people who have gotten sick.

This is a growing trend. When we started this research effort back in April, very few people knew anyone who had become sick. Now, almost 20 percent have a close family member who has been sickened.

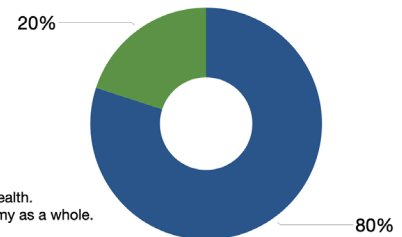
**An important note on younger donors:** Most organizations don't have a large number of donors under the age of 35. Still, it is important to point out that donors who fall into that group are having special difficulty. Seventy-five percent of donors in that age group say they are struggling with stress and anxiety. They are also more likely to have reduced income.

We would draw your attention to three other critical findings in this area:

- By a four-to-one margin, donors say they are more concerned about coronavirus's impact on people's health than about the economy.

*Thinking about the impact of coronavirus on the country, which are you most worried about?*

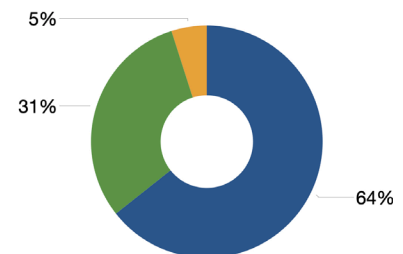
● The impact of coronavirus on people's health.  
● The impact of coronavirus on the economy as a whole.



- Sixty-four percent of donors report that they are "very concerned" about someone in their personal circle becoming infected.

*How concerned are you that you, someone in your family, or someone you know may become infected with the coronavirus?*

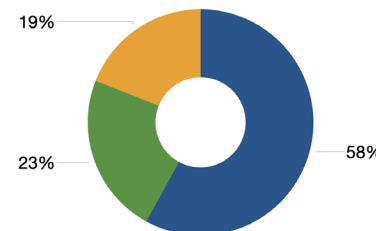
● Very concerned  
● Somewhat concerned  
● Not concerned



- And, in terms of the trajectory of the crisis, more than half of respondents (58 percent) say they believe the worst is yet to come. All that gives you a window into why their anxiety about the crisis is so high.

*When it comes to the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, do you think that...*

● The worst is yet to come.  
● The worst is over.  
● Don't know enough to say.

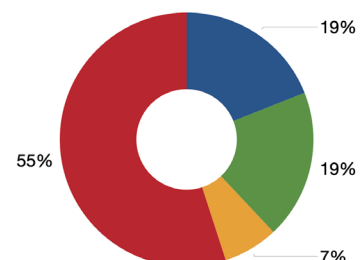


## #2: The administration's response has eroded confidence in leadership across the government.

Reflecting what we see in national polling, more than half of donors strongly disapprove of the Trump administration's handling of the COVID-19 crisis. When we look at progressive donors who also identify as Democrats, that strong disapproval rating jumps to 80 percent.

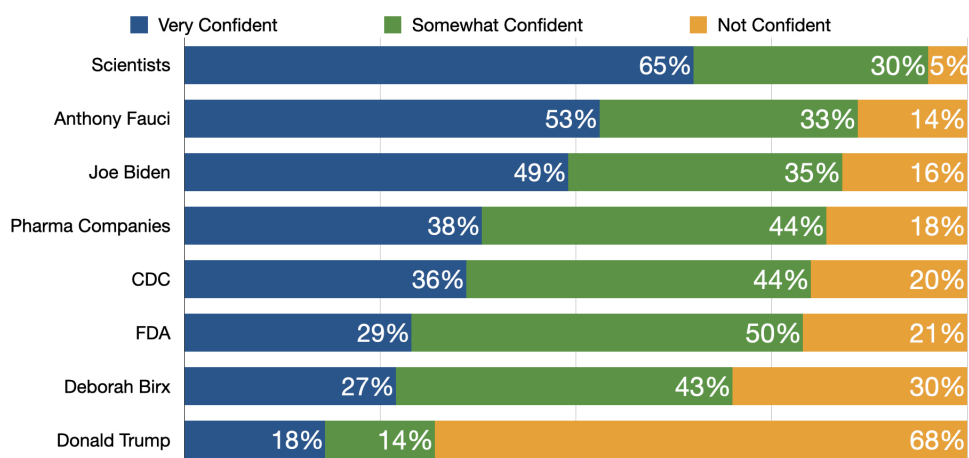
*Based on what you know, do you approve or disapprove of the Trump administration's handling of the COVID-19 crisis?*

● Strongly approve  
● Somewhat approve  
● Somewhat disapprove  
● Strongly disapprove



The lack of confidence translates into low levels of trust in the Trump administration and its agencies when it comes to vaccines. Notably, 49 percent are “very confident” of Joe Biden on vaccines compared to only 18 percent expressing that level of confidence in Donald Trump.

**When it comes to a vaccine, what is your level of confidence that the following can be trusted to deliver honest information about its readiness and efficacy?**

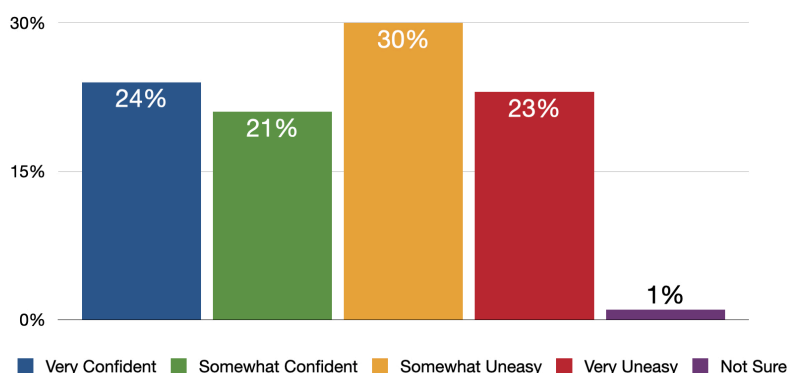


Still, over half (53 percent) of respondents say they would definitely take a vaccine if it were available today. And another 31 percent say they would probably take the vaccine.

**#3: Donors have much higher confidence in their own financial future than they do in the economy as a whole.**

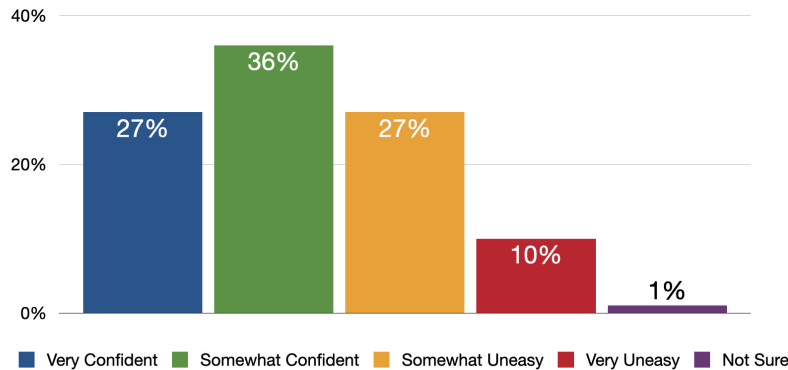
A majority of donors express unease about the direction of the U.S. economy over the year ahead.

**When you think about the direction of the U.S. economy over the next year, do you feel confident or uneasy?**



In contrast, 63 percent express confidence about their personal financial situation over the same time frame.

**And now thinking about your personal financial situation, do you feel confident or uneasy?**



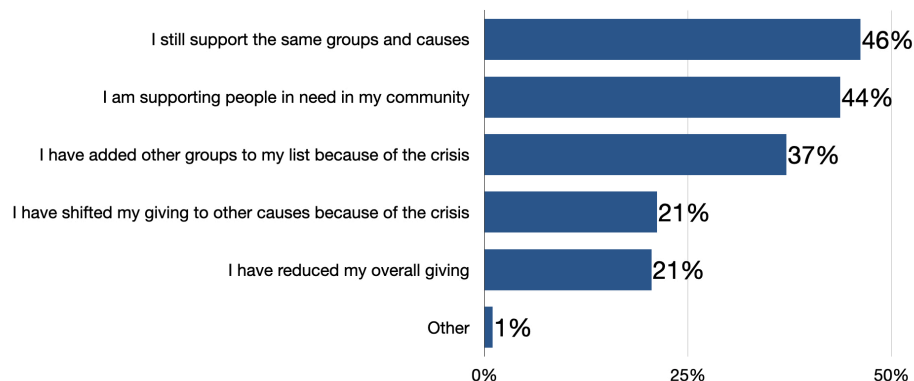
These contrasting responses are common in times of economic difficulty. Donors tend to be more financially secure and better insulated against crises than the general public. That said, the results do offer a measure of reassurance when it comes to the ability of many donors to keep supporting the causes they believe in.

This is a place where midlevel donors, those who give more than \$1,000 a year, trend higher than others. Ninety percent of them feel confident in their personal financial situation over the next year. So they are not much worried about themselves. They're also a little more confident in the economy as a whole.

#### **#4: The instinct to keep giving is stronger than ever.**

Over 80 percent of donors are giving to the same causes they have supported over time, or have also added new groups to that list. In fact, more than 40 percent of those who are still giving to their existing groups have added new causes or are helping out in their community.

**Has the COVID-19 pandemic caused you to make changes to the causes and organizations you support?**



What's more, donors have a clear intent to keep at it. Eighty percent of donors are confident that they will continue to support the organizations and causes that they care about over the

next year. This level of confidence in future giving was high back in April, but it is elevated even higher in our September data. Among monthly donors, more than 90 percent are confident that they will be able to keep giving.

**In terms of current issue priorities, racial justice tops the list, followed by hunger, children, and the election.** Racial justice was in a much lower position back in June but has now risen to the top, even scoring ahead of the elections.

## Racial justice, hunger, children, and the election...

Thinking about the causes you care about and the types of organizations you support, which are the most important to you right now? You may choose up to three.

*\* causes below 3% not shown*

Racial justice	28%
Hunger	23%
2020 elections	22%
Climate change	22%
Children	20%
Poverty	18%
Access to health care	15%
Animal protection	15%
Environment/nature	14%
Education	14%
Homelessness	13%
Reproductive rights	13%
Voting rights	11%
LGBTQ rights	11%
Civil liberties	11%
Supreme Court	9%
Gun violence prevention	8%
Criminal justice reform	8%
Immigrants' rights	6%
International relief	5%

**Interestingly, donors are especially concerned that the pandemic is triggering a hunger crisis in the United States.** Sixty-five percent of respondents strongly agreed with the following statement, and another 31 percent somewhat agreed:

If we don't act now to give people the resources to survive, escalating hunger and food insecurity in this country could cause a deadly second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So there was almost universal acceptance of the statement. The long lines at food pantries and soup kitchens are something very visible in donors' own communities, and not something people are accustomed to seeing at this level in the United States.

## **#5: Donors see real and growing urgency in the movement for racial justice.**

As noted above, racial justice is now a dominant concern for donors. We asked donors how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

There is no more important issue in our country right now than the need to address the deep racial injustices at the heart of our criminal justice system.



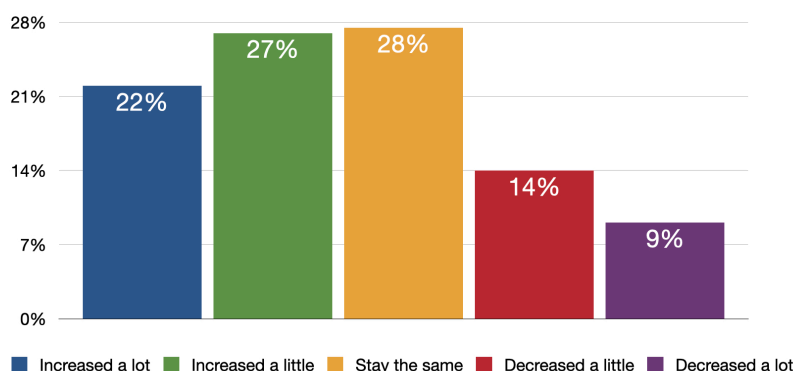
Eighty-eight percent of donors agreed with this statement, including 44 percent who strongly agreed. That is an impressive level of agreement for such a definitive “no more important issue” statement. It indicates the extraordinary intensity of donor feelings on this issue.

In another key indicator, we borrowed a question from a recent Pew study to gauge donors’ openness to a conversation about systemic racism. There is a clear willingness to have that conversation. But this is one area where the progressive donor community is out in front of the more mainstream donor community. Only 55 percent of mainstream donors chose the first statement.

It makes the U.S. stronger when we acknowledge the country's historical flaws.	70%
The U.S. may not have been perfect, but focusing on its historical flaws makes us weaker.	30%

Now we see the willingness to have a conversation, but we also see in the response to another question evidence that donors don’t yet fully comprehend the connection between racial justice concerns and police funding.

### In my opinion, spending on policing in my area should be...



This isn’t necessarily a referendum on defunding the police or redirecting police funding to other uses. It’s just an example of donors not always connecting issues with guidance from the groups they support. As fundraisers and communicators, we have work to do connecting the dots for donors on these and other intersectional issues.

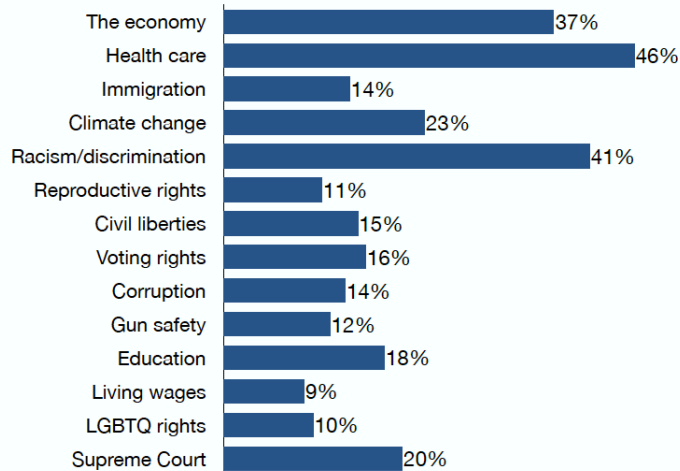
## **#6: Big events — the evolving COVID-19 crisis, the racial justice movement, and the passing of Ruth Bader Ginsburg — have shifted the issues that donors think will decide the election.**

From June to September, donors’ sense of which issues will be most critical in determining

the outcome of the election has shifted in significant ways. The chart below demonstrates that shift.

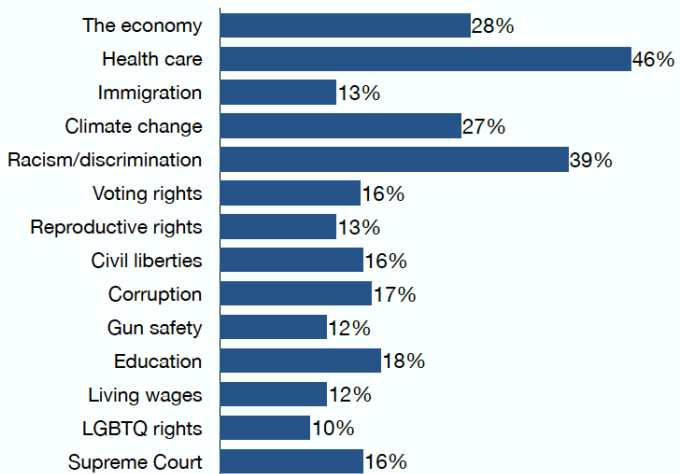
The issues are listed from top to bottom in the order in which donors placed them back in June. As you can see, racism/discrimination has moved all the way up to a position right behind health care. Immigration has fallen pretty far down on the list. And while still not in the top tier, the percentage of donors citing the Supreme Court has doubled.

When you think about the issues that will decide the 2020 elections, which do you think will be most important?



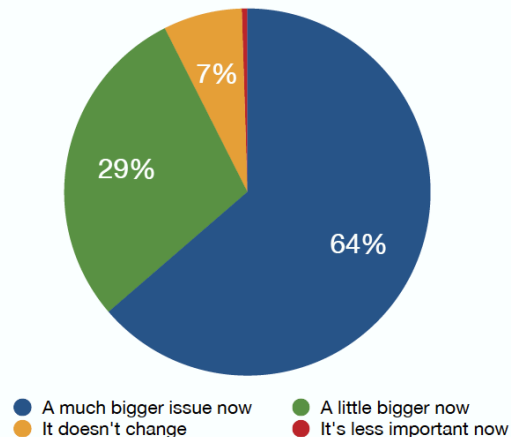
When the premise of the question is shifted to which issues will be most important to the donors in deciding how to vote, health care and racism/discrimination are at the top. They are followed, some distance back, by another pair of issues — the economy and climate change. On this version of the question, the percentage mentioning reproductive rights, while still low on the list, has also doubled over the course of the summer.

And now thinking about your own decision, which three issues will be most important to you when you cast your vote in the 2020 election?



Another measure of the increasing importance of reproductive rights as an election issue in the aftermath of RBG's passing can be seen in the response to the following direct question. Sixty-four percent of respondents believe that reproductive rights is a much bigger issue now.

In your opinion, how does the passing of Justice Ginsburg impact the issue of abortion in the 2020 elections?



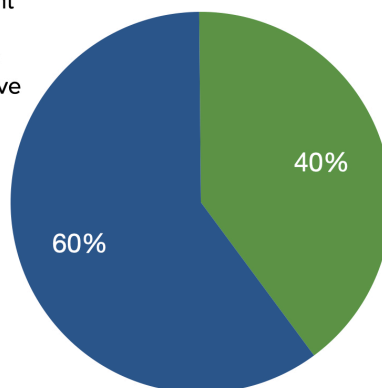
Our survey was fielded right after Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg died and before the Barrett nomination. In that context, we asked people how important it was to them that the next President would nominate another Supreme Court justice.

The question used a scale running from zero (not important) to 100 (extremely important). The average response was 83, indicating that donors placed the future of the Supreme Court as a very significant factor in their decision.

All year long, we have seen evidence that donors have limited confidence in the Democratic Party when it comes to fighting for what they believe in — and much more confidence in progressive advocacy groups. That sentiment is evident in the choice they made between two paired statements about Democrats' ability to win the fight over the timing of Ginsburg's replacement.

### Donors believe Democrats could win this fight – if they had the will.

Democrats can win this fight and preserve RBG's seat until a new President takes office in January, if they have the will to do what it takes.



It may happen before the election or it may happen in the lame duck, but Trump will get his pick confirmed. Democrats don't have the power to stop the process.

### #7: It's all about November.

As many of us believe, for donors, it's all about November. The election can't come soon

enough. Donors are following developments closely and are extremely anxious about both the outcome and election interference.

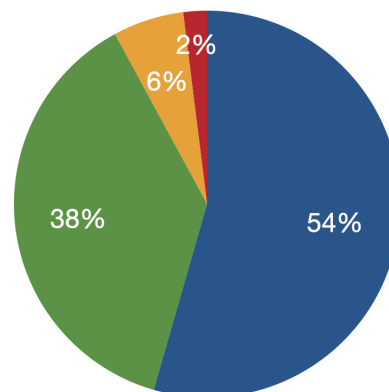
- Seven out of 10 donors report that they are following the election “very closely.”
- Another 27 percent (virtually the full balance of respondents) say they are following the election “somewhat closely.”
- Eighty percent of donors say they plan to vote, while another 12 percent report that they already have.
- In a sample that is 58 percent Democratic and 14 percent Independent, Biden is favored over Trump by a 76 percent to 24 percent margin.
- Donors are more concerned than they were in June that Trump will win re-election. Fifty-five percent believe his re-election is likely, compared to 45 percent unlikely.
- Half of donors believe that we won’t have a clear result to the presidential race on election night.
- Nearly 4 out of 10 think the results will be contested, requiring the Supreme Court to intervene.

## **#8: Access to voting is a big concern.**

Donors’ attitudes about the outcome of the election reflect a combination of clear thinking and emotional anxiety. One source of that anxiety is the fact that access to voting is a huge concern.

**93% are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on in-person voting.**

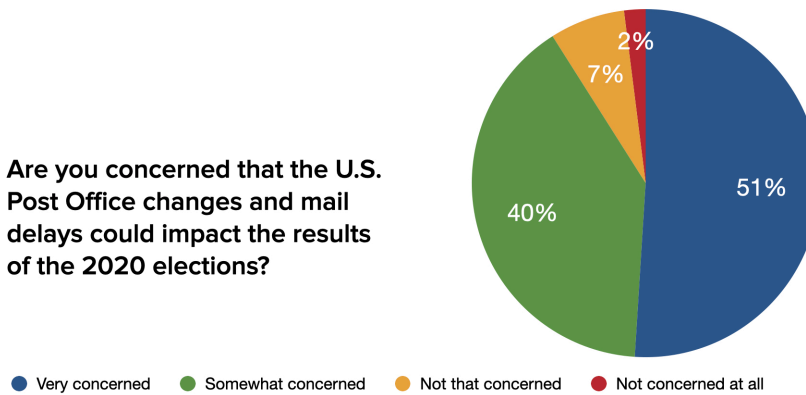
**Are you concerned that the coronavirus pandemic could deter people from voting in person in the 2020 elections?**



● Very concerned    ● Somewhat concerned    ● Not that concerned    ● Not concerned at all

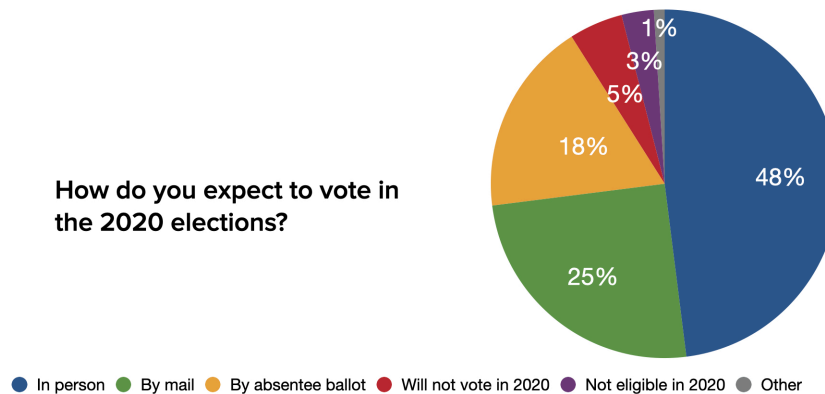
Donors are equally concerned about the role of the postal service in the election, no doubt reflecting news coverage about service cutbacks, concerns about whether the USPS can handle the massive volume of mail, and misinformation about mail-in voting.

**Are you concerned that the U.S. Post Office changes and mail delays could impact the results of the 2020 elections?**



Even with the concerns about COVID-19, almost half of donors plan to vote in person.

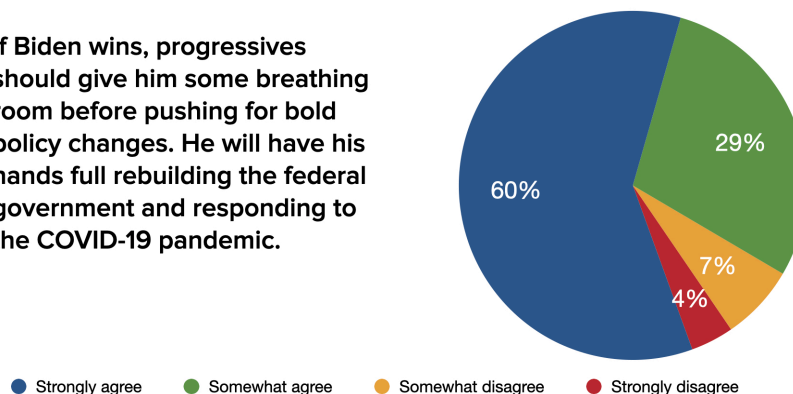
**How do you expect to vote in the 2020 elections?**



### **#9: In the case of a Biden win, donors may be inclined to give him some space early on.**

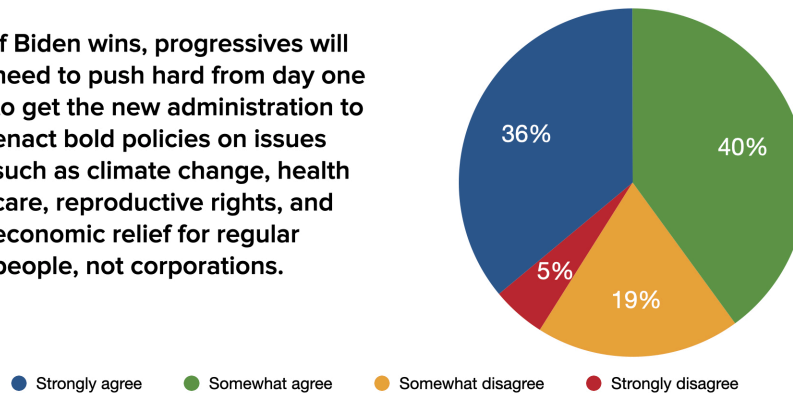
We asked donors two distinct agree/disagree statements about a Biden win. Here is the first statement, which, as you can see, was agreed to by nearly 90 percent of respondents.

**If Biden wins, progressives should give him some breathing room before pushing for bold policy changes. He will have his hands full rebuilding the federal government and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.**



We also asked people to react to a contradictory statement about progressives pushing hard from day one. Seventy-six percent of donors agreed with that statement.

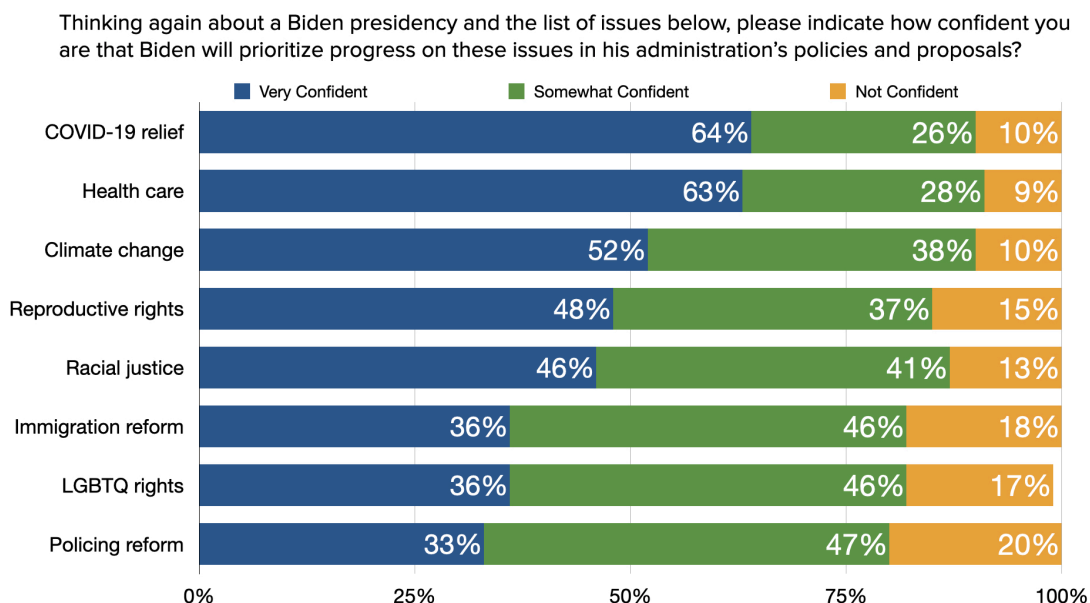
**If Biden wins, progressives will need to push hard from day one to get the new administration to enact bold policies on issues such as climate change, health care, reproductive rights, and economic relief for regular people, not corporations.**



What should we make of these seemingly incongruent responses? First, we should note that the first “give him breathing room” statement was strongly agreed to by 60 percent of respondents, compared to the 36 percent that strongly agreed with the “push hard from day one” statement.

That difference in intensity probably means that donors are leaning more toward giving Biden a little room at the outset. This sentiment is mostly driven by two factors. First, Biden will have just defeated Donald Trump, whom donors have yearned to see removed from office with, to borrow a favorite Biden phrase, “every fiber of their being.” A second compelling factor may be driven by donors’ confidence that Biden will prioritize many progressive issues.

See the list of issues below and the percentage of donors who are “very confident” that Biden will prioritize progress on them.



**It would be a mistake to over-read this initial willingness to give Biden a little room and time as patience that will be long-lasting.** After four years of playing defense, donors are as eager as the organizations they support to see the tide turn in a significant way. And, as we've seen with other "friendly" administrations, donors' patience can quickly evaporate if a leader like Biden misses opportunities or doesn't engage on issues that donors are anxious to see more forward.

## Recommendations for Action

### ■ **Remember that donors are in a fragile state.**

2020 has been an extraordinary year, with multiple crises that have directly disrupted people's lives, including those of our donors. Uncertainty, chaos, and unrelenting stress have taken their toll. In times like these, donors look to the groups they support — not to share their anxieties but to confidently forge a path forward.

### ■ **Realize that fear can be a powerful motivator, but only up to a point.**

Fear is very often a powerful motivator and a driver of donor response. But it's only a motivator up to a point. We can unintentionally push people too far — especially in a year as fraught as this one. If we make everything too scary, we could find ourselves freezing donors into inaction. Search for that line, and stay on the right side of it.

### ■ **Be aware that donors are stretching to the limit — from pet causes to community needs to the elections.**

We are in an extraordinary fundraising moment when it comes to donors' understanding of the high stakes and their willingness to stretch their giving as far as it can go.

### ■ **Be aware that donors' determined intentions may soon run into hard financial realities.**

With a significant percentage of donors experiencing a reduced income, we may come to a place where their intentions run smack into financial reality. A portion of our donors may reach a point where they just can't be as generous and responsive as they want to be.

### ■ **Know that donors are opening their eyes to deep racial injustices and are ready to address them.**

The murder of George Floyd, other high-profile incidents of police violence, and the dramatic protest movement have sparked a nationwide reckoning on racial injustice. Donors are highly motivated to address this crisis.

- **Embrace the need to educate donors on how the issues you address are connected to one another.**

Progressive organizations now need to accept the challenge of educating donors on strategies for addressing racial injustice and on the connections between the complex of issues that are involved. It's hard work, but it's vitally important.

- **Recognize that RBG's passing and the ensuing Supreme Court controversies have raised the stakes in the election even higher.**

Ruth Bader Ginsburg has long been a progressive leader of iconic dimensions. Her death was always going to be a critical moment, especially given its implications for the ideological balance on the Supreme Court. That it came so close to the most important election of our lifetimes raised the stakes even higher.

- **Prepare your messaging scenarios now, and fine tune them after the election to fit the actual events.**

The juxtaposition of November presidential elections and the critical year-end giving period has always presented a challenge. With the stakes running so high in 2020 and the real prospect that the outcome may be delayed well past Election Day, those complications are multiplying this year.

There is no way to wait for the outcome of the elections before setting our year-end and early 2021 strategies and messaging. Groups must devote October to preparing for a number of scenarios so that, after the election, all that is needed is fine tuning of the most relevant scenario.

- **Realize that, in a clear Biden win, donors will be inclined to take a well-deserved break.**

We noted earlier that, in the case of a clear Biden victory, donors might be willing to give Biden a little space before pressuring him to act on their priorities. After four years of intense and difficult activism, they may be inclined to give themselves a well-deserved break as well.

- **Recognize that, in a more hopeful environment, we will need to infuse our arguments with the tension of opportunity.**

Donors have been well-trained by events over the last four years to respond to challenges and crises. They've acted on the tension of crisis — preventing bad things from happening. But the tension of opportunity is really different. So we will have to shift gears, teaching ourselves and our donors how to be motivated to turn things in a more promising direction and make good things happen.



- **Note that, even if donors give Biden some room at the start, they won't stay patient for long.**

Progressive donors aren't known for their patience. They may be willing to give Biden a little bit of room now, but they're not going to maintain that posture for too long — especially if they see Biden and his administration faltering in their commitment to action on progressive priorities. The key at the start will be to express the boldness of your agenda without too much skepticism about Biden.

But that calculus will shift over time.

- **In the case of a Trump win, expect donors to be deflated.**

For four years now, donors have opposed Donald Trump with everything they've got. It has been an intensely personal, visceral experience. If their heartfelt yearning for an end to the Trump nightmare is frustrated, the impact will be very painful and very emotional.

- **Plan to work hard to keep hopelessness at bay.**

Responding to the first victory of a President whose policies progressive donors deeply oppose is different than responding to that President's re-election. The closest parallel we have is the 2004 re-election of President Bush. As disturbing as that was, it was nothing like the emotion surrounding Donald Trump.

What we saw when Bush won re-election was that donors had a month or two of urgent response, where they were really fired up. And as the policies of his second term started to pile up, they just went into a pretty deep depression that, frankly, lasted almost until the recession hit.

In a Trump re-election, there is no guarantee that donors will even be able to muster that initial burst of defiant energy. We will have to accept the burden of guiding donors through very challenging times.

- **Speak with confidence about the path forward.**

When donors are truly at a loss, they don't look to the organizations they support to share their pain. They search for leadership, confidence, and reassurance. We don't pretend that it will be easy for groups to display those qualities in a devastating Trump re-election climate. But that's what the situation will demand.

- **Don't expect donors to focus on much else as long as the election outcome is uncertain.**

If there's a prolonged period of uncertainty after Election Day, donors are likely to be totally

pre-occupied by that unfolding drama. They are really going to have trouble focusing on any other issue until this election is resolved. And that puts us, as fundraisers, in a very challenging place.

- **In the face of uncertainty, focus on urgent, tangible needs that must be met no matter the election outcome.**

There is no totally satisfying solution to the scenario just described, where donors are on pins and needles awaiting the outcome of the election. But the best of your limited options is to focus on what is urgent, what is tangible, what are the needs that have to come first — no matter the outcome of the elections.

## Conclusion

We hope that you have found our 2020 series of surveys helpful as we've tried to shed light on how donors are navigating through a truly extraordinary year. We look forward to working with our clients as we forge detailed messaging and program design strategies capable of guiding us through the critical weeks ahead.

And as the dust settles in early 2021, we will step back and ask ourselves how and when a research project like this can help all of us move forward with a better understanding of donor attitudes, opinions, and motivations.