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Exploring civic behaviors amongst college students in a year of national unrest

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Abstract

This study examined the role of demographics, civic beliefs, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in association with distinct forms of civic participation. College students were recruited across 10 institutions of higher education to complete an online survey. Bivariate, multivariable linear, and logistic regressions were performed. Findings indicated that participants from traditionally marginalized backgrounds were more likely to engage in systemchallenging forms of civic participation and community engagement than those from more privileged backgrounds. Participants who rated high in critical reflection, viewed racism as a key issue, and were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic were also more likely to engage in system-challenging forms of civic participation. Participants who endorsed beliefs supporting current systems of power were more likely to report they intended to vote. Results highlight implications for antiracist activism, community engagement, and traditional political civic behaviors.

KEYWORDS

activism, civic behaviors, critical consciousness civic participation

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Research on civic participation has predominantly involved distinct lines of inquiry regarding community engagement (e.g., volunteering) and traditional political action (e.g., voting, contacting one's representative). However, holistically exploring the multitude of ways young people are civically engaged is critical to understanding the many societal contributions young people make (Wray-Lake et al., 2017). Prior literature suggests a decline over the past 30 years in young peoples' involvement in traditional and volunteer-based forms of civic participation within the United States (Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2011). Yet, community psychologists have stressed the importance of expanding definitions of civic participation to capture more direct engagement in social movements, which may target social issues that are better situated in the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other Youth of Color (BIYOC) and other minoritized youth (Hope et al., 2019; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

The 2020 US election brought heightened levels of political and social conflict, coinciding with the unprecedented stress and disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ballard et al., 2020). During this time period, Americans witnessed threats to democracy playing out over mass media, as well as overt forms of violence, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia (Albright & Hurd, 2020). However, recent polls suggest that some young people were also a part of an upsurge in involvement in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and BIYOC turned out in record numbers during the election (CIRCLE, 2020), thus inviting a renewed exploration of who is participating in what forms of civic participation. Due to the unique sociopolitical climate on college campuses across the United States, this study contributes to a growing body of literature exploring what factors (demographics, civic beliefs, and concerns) are associated with distinct forms of civic participation. This information contributes to the field's understanding of more recent trends in civic participation, and has practical implications for identifying opportunities for civic development programs and resources on college campuses.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Below, we describe unique forms of civic participation and explore trends in the literature regarding civic concerns, civic beliefs, and demographic characteristics that can help explain nuances in youth civic behavior and generate hypotheses in the context of our study.

2.1 | Civic behaviors within and outside political structures

Civic participation is multifaceted and can range in behaviors (Finlay et al., 2010; Metzger et al., 2019; Pancer et al., 2007). Scholars have stressed that civic behaviors can occur both *within* and *outside* of existing political systems and institutional structures (Ballard et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2019; Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019). Research has traditionally operationalized civic participation primarily through engagement within existing political structures (Ballard et al., 2020). These activities include voting, participation in political clubs, contacting elected representatives, and attending local government meetings. While such activities may provide opportunities for social change and reform, these civic behaviors operate in alignment with current institutional decision-making structures (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019). Thus, such behaviors have often been categorized as *traditional* forms of civic participation (Ballard et al., 2020; Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019; Pancer et al., 2007). Previous research has also documented *community-based* civic participation (e.g., volunteering at a community-based organization), as distinct from traditional political activities, as such behaviors do not explicitly operate inside or outside of current political structures (Ballard et al., 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2011). In contrast, *outside* engagement may consist of more direct activism and social movement involvement (e.g., protesting, civil disobedience) that is geared towards challenging existing systems and structures (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019). This type of civic participation is often

characterized as *activist*, centered around direct social action or public protest (Oosterhoff & Wray-Lake, 2019; Pancer et al., 2007).

Hope et al. (2019) further argue the importance of studying outside engagement with domain-specific social injustices as an avenue for activism that is situated in the identities and lived experiences of youths. Due to the recent national mainstream media attention to the BLM Movement and the large attendance at BLM protests during the summer of 2020 (before the November 2020 presidential election), specific civic behaviors in support of the Black community are important to explore in comparison to more general civic behaviors, especially in the aforementioned complex sociopolitical climate. Thus, this study will explore the following trends in distinct forms of civic participation: (1) traditional (within political structures), (2) community-based, and (3) activist (outside political structures).

2.2 | Civic concerns

Young people often begin their civic onboarding by developing an initial interest in a particular salient social issue grounded in their everyday lived experiences (Ballard et al., 2015; Kornbluh et al., 2020). Kornbluh et al. (2020) conducted qualitative interviews with 15 antiracist activists who described how gaining entry surrounding one particular societal issue or concern in college (e.g., the environment) provided them with a springboard to understanding how such an issue could intersect with other systems of oppression and spur exploration into unique forms of civic participation. Ballard et al. (2015) conducted 25 interviews with high school seniors, with findings indicating that concern around a particular social issue (e.g., immigration, homelessness) often motivated their civic participation. Interviewees whose identities were from historically oppressed racial/ethnic groups tended to focus on social issues formed through personal experiences (e.g., immigration), whereas those who occupied more privileged positionalities (e.g., cisgender, White) often formed an interest in a particular social issue due to their setting opportunity structures (e.g., volunteering at a homeless shelter through a service-learning program). In the context of the present study, top concerns for the country preceding the 2020 Presidential Election may vary and the content of such concerns could be associated with different forms of civic participation.

2.3 | Civic beliefs

Researchers have argued that examination of civic participation should move beyond behaviors to encompass civic-related beliefs (Metzger et al., 2019; Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Civic beliefs can be considered a psychological aspect of how young people engage with broader society and may serve as precursors to civic behaviors (Han et al., 2021). Critical consciousness is one framework that simultaneously examines civic beliefs and behaviors. Freire (1970) describes critical consciousness as a process for gaining an elevated understanding of social injustice translating towards targeted actions to promote social change. Critical consciousness has been strongly linked to a range of civic behaviors (Heberle et al., 2020), and has been further conceptualized as encompassing three key dimensions: (1) *critical reflection* (i.e., a raised cognitive awareness and critique surrounding systems of oppression that perpetuate social injustices), (2) *critical motivation* (i.e., the belief in one's own abilities, agency, and engagement in collective efforts to promote social change), and (3) *critical action* (i.e., behavioral activities geared towards promoting social change) (Watts et al., 2011). In this study, we explore critical reflection as one civic belief in relation to distinct forms of civic behavior. Research indicates that adolescents and young adults who rate higher in critical reflection are more likely to engage in civic action as compared to those who rate lower (Heberle et al., 2020).

Social dominance orientation (SDO) captures a civic belief focused on an individual's desire to uphold existing inequality structures amongst social groups (Pratto et al., 1994). SDO is based on motivational goals and values related to hierarchy-legitimizing myths, endorsing superiority/social power, competition for resources, and deservingness of one group over another rather than a critical analysis of ongoing systemic and institutional factors

contributing to such inequities (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). People are more likely to demonstrate SDO when they perceive their group's position within the hierarchy as threatened (Pratto & Shih, 2000). Pratto et al. (1994) found that individuals with higher SDO will tend to favor hierarchy-perpetuating ideologies (e.g., race superiority, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps), in comparison to those rating lower in SDO, who will tend to favor more equitable ideologies, policies, and programs (e.g., affirmative action). Oosterhoff et al. (2017) utilized longitudinal data to explore associations between SDO sentiments and organized activity involvement, finding that participants who reported higher in SDO were significantly less likely to engage in volunteer-based forms of civic participation one year later. In sum, dimensions of civic beliefs (critical reflection and SDO) may be differentially associated with unique forms of civic participation.

Political party affiliation may reflect another component of civic beliefs surrounding policies and national priorities. Prior research has indicated that young people are more detached from political parties compared to other points in time (Mycock & Tonge, 2011; Wattenberg, 2015). However, in past elections (specifically, Obama 2008, and Biden 2020) polling trends suggested that youth participation and turnout were key factors in electoral presidential elections (CIRCLE, 2020; Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2016). Wray-Lake et al. (2019) found strong associations with partisan affiliation (specifically Democrat or Republican) and electoral participation amongst young people as compared to individuals who were unaffiliated or associated with third party candidates or platforms (i.e., Independents, Unaffiliated, Green Party, etc.). Furthermore, they found that young people who identified as Democrats were more engaged in traditional civic activities outside of voting (e.g., writing to public officials) as well as a system-challenging civic behaviors (e.g., participate in a lawful demonstration, boycott certain products or stores) as compared to Republicans. In regard to racial justice, research also indicates that white guilt can be a motivating factor for civic participation (Dull et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2019). White Democrats tend to be more likely to recognize existing racial inequality within the US compared to White Republicans (Dull et al., 2021). Such beliefs may contribute to lower rates of Republican support regarding racial justice movements (Leach & Allen, 2017).

2.4 | Demographic trends in civic behaviors

Below, we describe several socio-demographic trends surrounding civic participation.

2.4.1 | Race/ethnicity

Researchers have hypothesized that motivations to engage in civic participation may differ based on young people's positionalities in relation to systems of oppression. Hope and Jagers (2014) found that experiences of marginalization and injustice became motivators for youth of color to engage in civic participation. Watts et al. (2011) further argue that such experiences can prompt heightened awareness of systems of inequity, a desire to push for social change, and sociopolitical action to address such inequities. It is important to note that there is variability within these overarching ethnic/racial groups as no group is a monolith and subpopulations have drastically different civic experiences and histories. Prior research suggests that Black, Latinx, and Asian youth may lean towards system-challenging (activist) and community-based (volunteer) forms of civic participation as compared to White youth (Lopez et al., 2006; Wray-Lake et al., 2020).

2.4.2 | Socioeconomic position (SEP)

Socioeconomic disparities in civic participation indicate that more economically advantaged individuals report higher levels of community service, voting, political voice, and supporting electoral campaigns (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020).

These disparities can be attributed to inadequate access in adolescence to civic developmental opportunities, education systems, and community-based resources (Astuto & Ruck, 2017). While research is limited, prior studies suggest that participants from lower SEP backgrounds are less likely to engage in civic participation as compared to their peers from higher SEP backgrounds (CIRCLE, 2019; Wray-Lake et al., 2017).

2.4.3 | Gender

Girls and women have been excluded from political participation through cultural norms and socialization processes (Cicognani et al., 2012). Yet, more recent research has yielded mixed results regarding gender differences in relation to distinct forms of civic participation (Cicognani et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2005). Adolescent girls tend to engage at higher rates in community service (Dávila & Mora, 2007), and are more likely to be sympathetic to social injustices compared to their male peers (Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). Alternatively, in a longitudinal study, Quintelier (2015) found no gender differences in the civic trajectories of adolescents. While research surrounding non-gender-conforming individuals' civic participation is limited, Poteat et al. (2018) found that transgender individuals' level of involvement in gay-straight alliances contributed to heightened forms of civic participation (specifically, community-based and activist).

2.4.4 | Sexual orientation

LGBQ+ youth in the United States experience heterosexism and gender-conforming narratives (DiFulvio, 2011). Researchers have theorized discrimination based on one's sexual orientation may be a source of motivation to help and/or better conditions for others experiencing systemic forms of oppression (Friedman & Leaper, 2010). DiFulvio (2011) conducted 22 interviews with LGBQ+ youth. Interviewees noted that their personal struggles with discrimination through social support mechanisms were often channeled towards collective civic action. Recently, Ballard et al. (2020) found that students who identify as homosexual reported higher participation in general activism and lower participation surrounding membership to political groups as compared to their heterosexual peers.

2.5 | Study framework and aims

Mirra and Garcia (2017) argue that many operationalizations of civic participation assume that the US upholds a strong democratic infrastructure that provides *everyone* with access to opportunity, and that can be leveraged as tools of self-governance to address any threats. However, they stress that civic participation for individuals belonging to traditionally marginalized populations (who endure ongoing oppression) can be much more turbulent, often involving interactions with systems of oppression in multiple domains, stripping one of their agency (e.g., education, criminal-legal system). Prior research indicates that experiences with group-based discrimination can motivate an individual's commitment to addressing injustices and fighting for the rights of stigmatized groups (Friedman & Leaper, 2010; Hope & Jagers, 2014). Thus, young people with intersecting positionalities in relation to systems of oppression (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity) may be more inclined towards civic beliefs and concerns that recognize current systems of power, and thus elect to pursue more system-challenging and community-based avenues of civic participation.

With this framework in mind, our study explores three key research questions: (1) What were college students' top concerns for the United States just before the 2020 presidential election? (2) What role does socio-demographics play in association with different forms of civic participation? and (3) How are college student

socio-demographics, civic concerns, and civic beliefs associated with the different forms of civic participation (see Figure 1)? Regarding question one, we anticipated that college students' top concerns for the country would vary in content. We hypothesized that concerns tied to current systems of oppression (e.g., racism) might be associated with more system-challenging civic behaviors (i.e., general activism, and activism in support of the Black community) as these individuals recognized existing societal inequities (Hypothesis 1). Thus, we selected to employ an exploratory approach utilizing open-ended text-based survey responses to describe the top concerns identified by college students just before the 2020 presidential election.

Concerning research questions two and three, we stress Mirra and Garcia's (2017) argument that one's identity in relation to positions of power, social concerns, and civic beliefs may be associated with different forms of civic participation operating within and outside of existing systemic structures of democracy. Research indicates continually experiencing systemic oppression via race/ethnicity, gender, class, and/or sexual orientation may act as a motivator towards civic participation (specifically more activist forms) (Cicognani et al., 2012; DiFulvio, 2011; Hope & Jagers, 2014; Wray-Lake et al., 2017). We hypothesized that college students with systematically marginalized identities (classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism) would be more likely to be significantly associated with community-based civic activities, civic activities that occur *outside* the system (i.e., general activist and activism in support of the Black community) compared to peers experiencing more system privileging positionalities (Hypothesis 2).

In regard to question three, research indicates that critical reflection may be more likely to be significantly associated with system-challenging (i.e., activism, support towards the Black community) and community-based

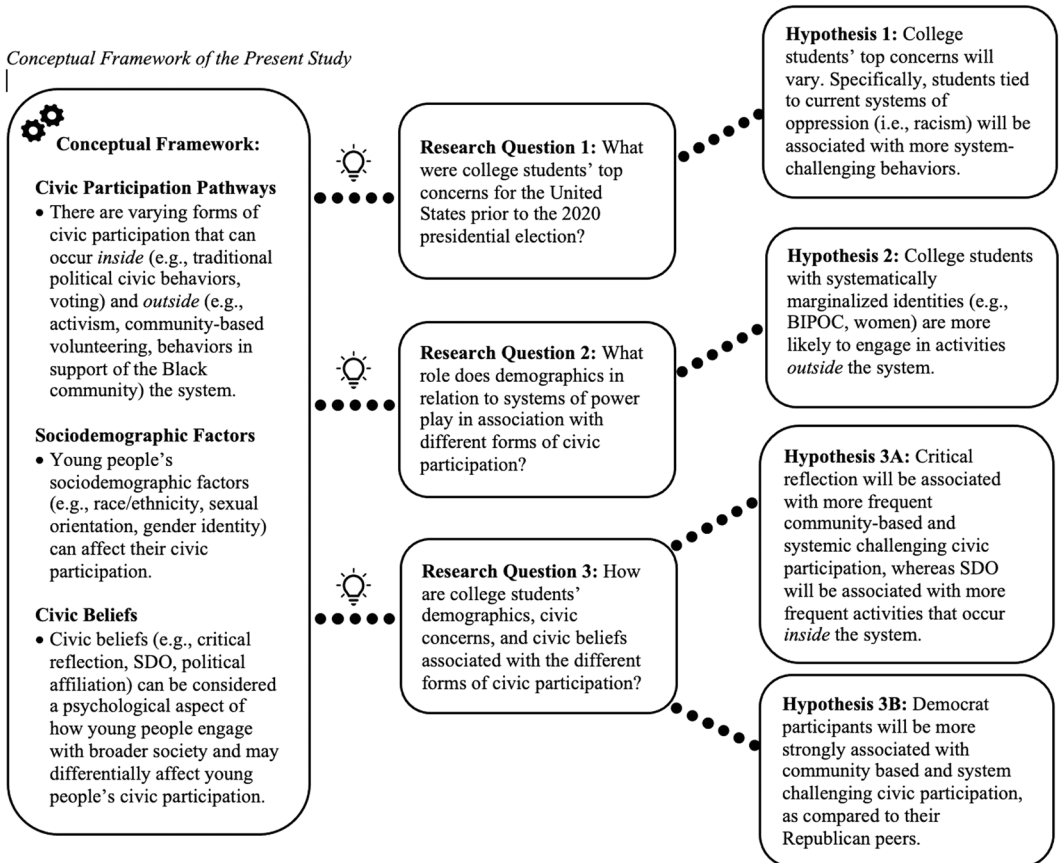


FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework of the present study

civic participation, whereas college students who rate higher in SDO beliefs are more likely to significantly associated with civic behaviors that operate within existing institutional structures (i.e., voting, traditional). Thus, we hypothesized that critical reflection would be significantly associated with more frequent community-based and systemic challenging civic participation, whereas SDO beliefs would be associated with more frequent activities that occur *inside* the system such as traditional political civic behaviors and intentions to vote (Hypothesis 3A). We also hypothesized that Democrat participants would be more likely to be significantly associated with community-based and system-challenging civic participation as compared to their Republican peers (Hypothesis 3B). Lastly, due to the emerging literature surrounding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, we explore how experiences during the pandemic relate to college students' civic behaviors.

2.6 | Study context

Elections have a notable impact on college students (Albright & Hurd, 2020). Hagan et al. (2020) found that one in four college students reported clinically depressive symptoms specifically related to the 2016 election. During the same election, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented increased instances of harassment, racial slurs, and heightened concerns by minority students for their families and communities (Costello, 2016). Yet, during the recent election, young people also engaged in high turnout in public support of the BLM (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020), and polling data suggests record numbers of BIYOC exercised their right to vote and promoted voter outreach in the midst of a pandemic (CIRCLE, 2020). College campuses can provide novel microsystems for some young people in promoting civic engagement and heightened consciousness-raising surrounding civic beliefs (Ballard et al., 2020; Flanagan & Bundick, 2011). In these settings, some young people are exposed to new social networks and worldview paradigms, as well as unique course curriculum and proximity to different forms of civic participation (Ballard et al., 2020; Kornbluh et al., 2020; Kornbluh et al., 2021). However, it is important to acknowledge that these opportunities are not made available or offered to all students and can also be sites of systematic oppression (Kornbluh et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed existing structural inequalities at the intersections of racial/ethnic minority status, gender, sexual orientation, and SEP (Bambra et al., 2020). Additionally, racial/ethnic, gender, and SEP disparities have been documented in educational, health, and employment opportunities (Flores et al., 2019). In times of crisis, such disparities are often reinforced and exacerbated due to limited resources, support, and heightened fear (Bambra et al., 2020). Researchers have postulated that the pandemic may play a part in mobilizing certain individuals to participate in novel forms of civic participation due to (1) the direct impact of the pandemic on one's own health as well as that of their family and community and (2) structural inequities that existed before and expanded as a result of the pandemic (Kaskazi, 2021). Alternatively, trauma experienced by the pandemic may also make it challenging for certain individuals and groups to engage in civic participation. Keeping this context in mind, exploring the civic lives of diverse college students during a historic time period within the US will further advance our understanding of civic developmental processes and the implications for educational settings in promoting civic participation.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Our positionality

As authors, we occupy multiple identities and spaces including White, Iranian-American, cisgender women, feminist, Jewish, highly educated, graduate student, and nontenured academic. We examine our findings with a specific lens, guided by our socio-cultural backgrounds embedded with assumptions and inherent blind spots. Applying Foulger's

(2010) concept of a “critical friend,” we were part of a larger research team engaged in data instrument development, data collection, and analysis that also encompassed researchers identifying as Black, Asian, and men and women from diverse geographic regions. Our research team also included youth (i.e., 18–21-year-old undergraduate students) who provided input on survey design, piloted the survey, and assisted with data analysis.

3.2 | Data collection procedures

College students were recruited through virtual flyers (see Appendix A) and classroom announcements (approximately 10–20 per site) across 10 geographically unique institutions of higher education: West Coast (California, Washington), Midwest (Michigan, Montana), Northeast (New York), and Southeast (West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina) including a combination of public and private schools. Flyers and classroom announcements highlighted the purpose of the study, the estimated amount of time participants could expect to spend if they chose to participate, instructions on how to sign up, and details surrounding benefits of participating (i.e., chance of winning a gift card). Participants received course credit for completing a 30–40-minute online survey for two weeks leading up to the 2020 presidential election (October 5th–18th, 2020). This study was approved by the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (#1014189).

3.3 | Measures

Demographic data were gathered regarding gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, SEP, institution of higher education, and political party affiliation. Regarding civic concerns, participants responded to the open-ended survey question: “Currently, what is your top concern for the country?” In terms of civic attitudes, *critical reflection* was measured using a 47-item scale based on qualitative research by Hershberg, Johnson, Boguk, et al. (2019). The measure taps into understandings of inequality (e.g., “It is important to correct social and economic inequality”) across more dimensions of inequality compared to previous measures. Participants indicated their level of agreement with each item on a sliding scale, with response options ranging from 0 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 10 (*Strongly Agree*). Although the measure validation has not been published, the authors have done preliminary validation work to indicate strong measurement development (see Hershberg, et al., 2019). In the present sample, this scale demonstrated strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$; $M = 6.17$, $SD = 1.34$). SDO was measured using an 8-item scale created by Pratto et al. (1994), capturing preferences for structural and systemic inequality, asking participants: “Which of the following items do you have positive or negative feelings towards?” Items varied in statements surrounding social inequality (e.g., “It is okay if some people have more of a chance in life than others” vs. “All humans should be treated equal”). Items were scored on a 7-point Likert-scale, with response options ranging from “Strongly Negative” to “Strongly Positive”, with some items reverse coded. Thus, a higher score indicated greater inclinations towards SDO values ($M = 1.99$; $SD = 0.85$). This scale also exhibited decent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.76$). Political party affiliation was measured with the following survey item: “In politics, as of today, what is your party affiliation?”. Participants selected a political party from a list of six options (Republican, Democrat, Green Party, Libertarian Party, Independent Party, and Unaffiliated).

Community-based, traditional political, and activist forms of civic behaviors were measured using nine items adapted from the Youth Involvement Inventory (YII) (Pancer et al., 2007). Participants were asked to indicate how many times they participated in each civic behavior within the past month using a sliding scale from 0 (“Never”) to 10 (“Very Often”). Specifically, community-based behaviors were measured through five items (e.g., “Volunteered at a community event”). This scale suggested strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$; $M = 2.42$, $SD = 2.59$). Traditional political behaviors were measured through two items (e.g., “Contacted a political representative to tell him/her how you felt about a particular issue”) also demonstrating decent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$; $M = 1.29$, $SD = 2.24$). Lastly,

activist behaviors were measured through six items (e.g., “Attended a protest march, meeting, or demonstration”). This scale exhibited strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$; $M = 3.19$, $SD = 2.53$). Activism in support for the Black community was measured using the 26-item Black Community Activism Orientation Scale developed by Hope et al. (2019). In this scale, participants were asked to: “Please indicate how likely you are to engage in the following behaviors.” Sample survey items included “Sign a petition for a political cause specific to the Black community” with five Likert scale response items ranging from 1 (Extremely Unlikely) to 5 (Extremely Likely). The scale indicated strong internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.97$; $M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.95$). In addition, intention to vote was recorded as a binary act (i.e., *plan to vote* vs. *don't plan to vote*).

Participants also answered a series of six questions related to their experiences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions were adapted from the Kalichman COVID-19 assessment interview questions for vulnerable populations (See Center for Drug Use and HIV, 2020). Specifically, participants were asked to report: “Which of the following events have you experienced since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?” Sample survey items included “Have you had a sudden change in your housing arrangement or have you missed one or more rent or mortgage payments since the beginning of COVID-19?” Response options were coded dichotomously (No = 0, Yes = 1). A composite score of cumulative COVID-19 impact was calculated by summing participant scores on the six survey items ($M = 0.88$, $SD = 0.96$). (See Appendix B regarding survey instruments and descriptive statistics).

3.4 | Sample

Six hundred and ninety-five participants completed the survey. Seventy-four percent of the sample identified as women, 25.4% identified as men, 0.1% transgender, 0.3% gender queer/gender non-conforming, and 0.3% different identity. Eighty percent of the sample identified as heterosexual, whereas 19.4% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ). Students identified as White (64.7%), Asian (13.8%), Latinx/Hispanic (14.1%), Black/African American (6.3%), Bi-Racial/Multi-Racial (5.3%), Middle Eastern/North African (4.0%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1.7%), and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.7%). Most participants were between the ages of 18–20 years old (i.e., 87%). Participants reported household incomes of less than \$40,000 (17.7%), \$40,000–\$100,000 (36.1%) and greater than \$100,000 (46.2%). Demographic characteristics of our sample were relatively consistent across geographic regions, although more racial/ethnic diverse participants came from the West Coast compared to the Midwest (see Appendix D for more details).

3.5 | Data analysis

An inductive approach was employed for the thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). We initially reviewed the data to understand the general responses and the range of responses to each question. The first author and two undergraduate research assistants composed memos after reviewing the first 100 responses to each question, noting the varying responses and key concepts. We met as a group, reviewed the memos, selected and defined codes that captured the key concepts, and created a codebook based on the consolidated list of codes. We hand-coded all responses and recorded a “1” or “0” in the spreadsheet to indicate whether a concept was endorsed. Responses were coded twice independently by two undergraduate research assistants (inter-rater reliability was achieved at 80%), then the first author and the research assistants met to discuss inconsistencies in coding employing a consensus approach. To develop the themes, the research team discussed the codes within and across each question and looked for patterns in the data that incorporated multiple codes. Themes were then defined and described. Based on the text-based thematic analysis, themes and sub-themes were transformed into binary variables (endorsed/did not endorse theme). After reviewing the codes, we chose to add “racism” (i.e., participants

identified racism as a top concern for the country) into the quantitative multivariable regression analyses (described below). This theme was included due to the frequency in participant responses, the code's conceptual fit with key research questions (i.e., tapping into participants' understanding of specific systems of oppression), and the recent media attention surrounding the violence on Black and Brown bodies during the time of the study. We also analyzed the other two most frequently reported concerns for the country (social injustice, and economy) in subsequent multivariate regression models for comparison (see Appendix E).

We conducted bivariate regressions to explore group differences across civic attitudes, concerns, and behaviors. Next, multivariable regression analyses were employed to explore and compare the associations between sociodemographic variables, political affiliation, civic attitudes, concerns, and the impact of experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to civic behaviors. Due to the sample sizes for each demographic group, gender (i.e., men vs. women)¹, race (White vs. BIYOC), and sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual vs. LGBQ) were dummy coded for the regression analyses. Furthermore, due to small cell sample sizes those identifying as part of the Green, Libertarian, or Independent Parties were collapsed into one category ("Other Affiliation") in comparison to Republican and Democrats for data analysis purposes. The multivariable regression analyses included 14 variables: gender identity, ethnic identity, age, SEP, sexual identity, geographic region, political party affiliation, critical reflection, SDO, civic concerns (i.e., racism, social injustice, and economic concerns), and impact of COVID-19. Notably, a multivariable logistic regression was performed to explore factors associated with voting, which consisted of a binary variable (yes/no).

4 | RESULTS

Multi-method bivariate, multivariate, logistic regression findings are reported in alignment with the proposed study hypotheses.

4.1 | Research Question 1 (associations between civic concerns and civic behaviors)

4.1.1 | Text-based results

We first present findings surrounding text-based data to identify the most prevalent civic concerns for young people during the 2020 presidential election. Notably, this analysis helped guide our multivariate regression model by incorporating the top three concerns for the country in exploring associations for distinct forms of civic participation (discussed in further detail below). Open-ended text-based findings indicated seven prominent responses: (1) social injustice, (2) racism, (3) economy, (4) civil unrest, (5) environment, (6) COVID-19, and (7) constitutional rights (see Table 1). Notably, codes were not mutually exclusive and thus responses could be coded in multiple categories. Concerning social injustice, 264 participants (38%) indicated a broad concern for inequity as well as the specific rights of historically minoritized and oppressed groups (i.e., Women, LGBQ, impoverished, and the BIYOC community). Participants expressed general concerns surrounding the right to basic needs and democratic processes (e.g., *losing my rights as a minority*), as well as concern that the rights of historically marginalized groups were being taken away (e.g., *women's rights and access to medical care*). In regard to racism, 151 participants (21.7%) indicated concern for the safety, civil rights, health, and protection of racial and ethnic minorities. Participants noted concern surrounding institutional racism (e.g., *systematic racism in our country*) and racist ideology (e.g., *I'm worried that racism and white supremacy will continue to rise*), as well as specific fears for the health and safety of specific

¹Due to the small sample size, transgender and gender diverse participants were dropped for the multivariable regression analysis. We recognize the limitation this imposes on this analysis and its ability to inclusively capture a range of positionalities.

TABLE 1 Open-ended text-based survey responses

Theme definition	Example quotes
Social Injustice (264 responses; 38%): Participants expressed anxieties surrounding issues centered in systemic injustice (poverty, discrimination, sexism, etc.).	<i>"I am concerned US citizens are not getting the rights they deserve (healthcare etc.)"</i>
Racism (151 responses; 21.7%): Participants articulated heightened concern surrounding racist acts targeted at racial/ethnic minority groups and communities, and the importance of addressing racism as a national-level.	<i>"I'm really worried for the migrant families living in the U.S. and for people of color, specifically the black community because it seems like if Trump wins, he'll take everything away."</i>
Economy (91 responses; 8.1%): Participants identified the economy as a top concern. Concerns varied from socialism to the current capitalist system.	<i>"The economic situation--we need to prevent and remove socialist policies."</i> <i>"The rich get richer and the poor get poorer."</i>
Civil Unrest (76 responses; 6.8%): Participants expressed a fear of heightened divisiveness leading to violence within the United States.	<i>"Possible civil war. Too much division in this country."</i> <i>"Growing gap between political ideologies leading to violence."</i>
Environment (63 responses; 5.6%): Participants identified protecting the environment, and climate change as a top concern.	<i>"Ensuring the environmental health of our land".</i> <i>"Mine is climate change. If we don't deal with it, the more severe the consequences will be."</i>
COVID-19 (42 responses; 3.7%): Participants noted the health impacts and spread of COVID-19 as a top concern for the country.	<i>"COVID-19 needs to be properly handled at a national level."</i> <i>"My top concern for the country is keeping people alive and well. We need to focus on stopping the spread of COVID-19."</i>
Constitutional Rights (7 responses; 0.6%): Participants expressed fear in their constitutional rights being taken away in the domains of religion, freedom speech, and the ability to bear arms.	<i>"Upholding the constitution (freedom of speech, religion, right to bear arms, 14th amendment)."</i>

racial/ethnic minority groups (e.g., *we need equal rights for Black people*). The economy was an additional concern for participants. Ninety-one participants (8.1%) indicated concerns surrounding experiencing financial distress (e.g., *student loans*), a desire to protect current economic structures (e.g., *keeping capitalism*), a fear of changes to economic structures (e.g., *Joe Biden's taxes*), or a desire for new policies and practices (e.g., *balancing the distribution of wealth among all communities*). Regarding civil unrest, 76 participants (6.8%) expressed fear of political polarization leading to conflict, tension, and potential violence. Responses varied from divisiveness in political partisanship (e.g., *the polarization of politics, too much of an "us vs them" mentality*) to fear of politically motivated violence (e.g., *that hell will break loose after the election*). Sixty-three participants (5.6%) expressed a strong concern for the environment, highlighting the need to protect natural resources and a growing concern for global warming and climate change (e.g., *Climate change. Nothing will matter if our earth is destroyed*). Forty-two participants (3.7%) described their concerns surrounding addressing as well as stopping the spread of COVID-19. Responses described a concern regarding the impact of COVID-19 on public health (e.g., *lowering COVID-19 deaths*). Lastly, seven participants (0.6%) expressed concerns for their constitutional rights. Notably, these concerns tended to fall under the domains of religion (e.g., *freedom of religion*), freedom of speech (e.g., *eliminating liberal bias, freedom of speech and pro-Americanism*), and the ability to bear arms (*right to bear arms*) typically stressed within more conservative values.

4.1.2 | Quantitative results

Multivariable regression results indicated that civic concerns surrounding racism were only significantly associated with two distinct forms of civic participation identified as *system-challenging behaviors* (partially supporting Hypothesis 1). Specifically, findings suggest that those who indicated racism as a top concern for the country were more likely to engage in general activist behaviors ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.05$) as well as specific behaviors in support of the Black community ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.01$) as compared to those who didn't indicate racism as a top concern (see Table 2). Multivariable regression results surrounding other civic concerns (see Appendix E) reflected that those who indicated concerns surrounding social injustice were significantly more likely to engage in traditional political behaviors ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$) and were significantly less likely to intend to vote (OR = 0.22, $p < 0.01$). Civic concerns surrounding the economy were not significantly associated with any forms of civic participation.

4.2 | Research Question 2 (demographics in association with civic behaviors)

Bivariate regressions highlight differences in demographics in relation to civic beliefs and behaviors (see Table 3 and Appendix C for correlation Tables).

4.2.1 | Gender

Women reported significantly higher scores in the domains of critical reflection ($F(1, 661) = 38.69, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.06$) and significantly lower scores in SDO ($F(1, 662) = 49.94, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.04$) compared to men. Women also reported more engagement in system-challenging civic behaviors (i.e., activism, volunteering, and activist behavior in support of the Black community; $F(1, 651) = 34.67, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.05$; $F(1, 636) = 15.45, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.02$; $F(1, 661) = 34.89, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.05$) and civic behaviors operating within existing institutional structures (i.e., traditional political; $F(1, 615) = 9.9, p = 0.002, R^2 = 0.02$) as compared to men. Women were also 2.19 times more likely than men to indicate racism as a top concern for the country ($p = 0.002$).

4.2.2 | Race/ethnicity

BIYOC reported higher levels of critical reflection ($F(1, 665) = 15.09, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.02$), activism ($F(1, 658) = 19.97, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.03$), civic behavior in support of the Black community ($F(1, 665) = 19.38, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.03$) and traditional political civic behavior ($F(1, 619) = 4.72, p = 0.03, R^2 = 0.01$) as compared to White participants. BIYOC participants were also 3.19 times more likely to vote ($p < 0.001$) and were 1.67 times more likely to indicate racism as a top concern for the country ($p < 0.001$) as compared to White participants.

4.2.3 | Age

Bivariate regressions indicated that age was a significant predictor of critical reflection, suggesting that older participants reported higher levels of critical reflection compared to younger participants ($F(1, 651) = 7.26, p = 0.007, R^2 = 0.01$).

TABLE 2 Multiple regressions and logistic regression

	YII- Activism β (SD)	YII-Volunteering β (SD)	YII-Traditional Political β (SD)	Black Community Activism Orientation Scale β (SD)	Voting b (SE); Exp (B)
Constant	-3.77 (1.16)	-2.48 (1.37)	-3.94 (1.23)	0.65 (0.37)	-1.8 (2.06); 0.17
Demographics					
Women	0.12 (0.24)*	0.13 (0.28)*	0.09 (0.25)**	0.06 (0.08)**	0.11 (0.38); 1.12
BIYOC	0.14 (0.25)*	0.14 (0.30)*	0.08 (0.26)	0.08 (0.08)**	0.58 (0.39); 1.79
Age	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.01)***	-0.05 (0.06); 0.95
SEP	0.03 (0.14)	0.03 (0.17)	-0.01 (0.15)	0.00 (0.05)	-0.41 (0.22); 0.66**
LGBQ	0.14 (0.27)*	0.04 (0.32)	0.06 (0.28)	0.12 (0.09)*	-0.33 (0.45); 0.72
West Coast	-0.06 (0.30)	-0.18 (0.35)*	-0.06 (0.32)	0.01 (0.10)	-0.45 (0.47); 0.64
Midwest	-0.05 (0.28)	-0.10 (0.34)***	-0.02 (0.30)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.44 (0.53); 0.65
Northeast	0.01 (0.30)	0.00 (0.36)	0.02 (0.32)	0.00 (0.10)	0.44 (0.47); 0.64
Republican	-0.09 (0.33)**	0.03 (0.39)	-0.02 (0.36)	-0.17 (0.11)†	-0.1.19 (0.63); 0.31**
Other Affiliation	0.02 (0.37)	0.01 (0.46)	0.04 (0.40)	-0.00 (0.12)	-0.87 (0.81); 0.42
Unaffiliated	-0.14 (0.26)*	-0.06 (0.31)	-0.10 (0.28)***	-0.10 (0.09)*	0.59 (0.39); 1.81
Civic Belief					
SDO	-0.01 (0.14)	0.08 (0.16)	0.10 (0.14)***	-0.11 (0.04)*	0.64 (0.21); 1.89*
Critical Reflection	0.33 (0.11)*	0.16 (0.13)*	0.24 (0.11)*	0.39 (0.03)*	0.01 (0.17); 1.01
Civic Concern: Racism	0.09 (0.24)***	0.07 (0.29)	0.07 (0.26)	0.09 (0.08)***	-0.50 (0.44); 0.61
COVID-19 Impact	0.06 (0.10)	0.08 (0.13)**	-0.01 (0.11)	0.09 (0.03)*	-0.39 (0.21); 0.68**
F	15.43*	3.59*	3.88*	29.81*	

* $p < 0.01$,** $p < 0.10$; *** $p < 0.05$,

Note: Reference group: Males, White, Straight, participants from the Southeast, and Democrats.

4.2.4 | Socioeconomic position

Participants from high SEP backgrounds (household income greater than \$100,000) were less likely to engage in activism in support of the Black community than participants from lower SEP backgrounds ($F(1, 679) = 3.59, p = 0.047, R^2 = 0.01$).

4.2.5 | Sexual orientation

LGBQ participants reported higher levels of critical reflection ($F(1, 663) = 54.49, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.08$) and lower levels of SDO ($F(1, 663) = 26.56, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.04$) compared to heterosexual participants. They also reported more engagement in activism ($F(1, 656) = 38.91, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.06$), civic behavior in support of the Black community ($F(1, 663) = 59.55, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.08$), and traditional political civic behavior ($F(1, 617) = 8.93, p = 0.003, R^2 = 0.01$) as compared to heterosexual participants.

TABLE 3 Bivariate regressions examining civic attitudes and behaviors

Predictor	Outcome variable									
	Critical reflection β (SE)	SDO β (SE)	Activism β (SE)	Traditional political β (SE)	Volunteering β (SE)	Support for the Black community β (SE)	COVID-19 impact β (SE)	Plan to vote b (SE); Exp(B)	Top concern: racism b (SE); Exp(B)	
<i>Gender (Reference group: Men)</i>										
Women	0.24 (0.12)*	-0.19 (0.08)*	0.22 (0.22)*	0.13 (0.21)*	0.15 (0.23)*	0.22 (0.08)*	0.06 (0.09)	-0.011 (0.27); 0.9	0.78 (0.25); 2.19*	
<i>Race/Ethnicity (Reference group: White)</i>										
BIPOC	0.15 (0.11)*	0.03 (0.07)	0.17 (0.21)*	0.09 (0.19)***	0.05 (0.22)	0.17 (0.08)*	-0.01 (0.08)	1.16 (0.24); 3.19*	0.51 (0.19); 1.67*	
Age	0.11 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.01)	0 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)	-0.05 (0.02)	0 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.08 (0.05); 0.92**	0.00 (0.02); 1.0	
<i>Household Income (Reference group: under \$40,000)</i>										
\$40,001-\$100,000	0.06 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.06 (0.22)	0.06 (0.2)	0 (0.23)	0.05 (0.08)	0.07 (0.08)**	0.00 (0.26); 1.00	0.21 (0.20); 1.24	
>\$100,000	-0.06 (0.11)	0.01 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.21)	-0.03 (0.19)	0.04 (0.21)	-0.08 (0.08)**	-0.05 (0.08)	-1.19 (0.31); 0.31*	-0.04 (0.2); 0.96	
<i>Sexual Orientation (Reference group: Heterosexual)</i>										
LGBQ	0.28 (0.13)*	-0.2 (0.08)*	0.24 (0.24)*	0.12 (0.23)*	0.08 (0.26)**	0.29 (0.09)***	-0.03 (0.09)	-0.16 (0.31); 0.85	0.53 (0.22); 1.69***	
<i>Geographic Region (Reference group: Southeast)</i>										
West Coast	0.26 (0.11)*	-0.03 (0.08)	0.15 (0.22)*	0.08 (0.2)***	-0.02 (0.23)	0.23 (0.08)*	-0.03 (0.09)	0.2 (0.26); 1.22	0.5 (0.2); 1.64***	
Midwest	-0.15 (0.13)*	0.01 (0.08)	-0.15 (0.25)*	-0.08 (0.23)**	-0.12 (0.26)*	-0.18 (0.09)*	-0.05 (0.10)	-0.92 (0.39); 0.40***	-0.66 (0.27); 0.52***	
Northeast	0.03 (0.14)	-0.03 (0.09)	0.07 (0.27)**	0.05 (0.24)	0.06 (0.28)	0.04 (0.1)	0.04 (0.1)	0.26 (0.29); 1.29	-0.03 (0.25); 0.97	
<i>Political Party Affiliation (Reference group: Democrat)</i>										
Republican	-0.53 (0.11)*	0.32 (0.08)*	-0.29 (0.23)*	-0.13 (0.22)*	-0.04 (0.25)	-0.43 (0.08)*	-0.00 (0.09)	-1.4 (0.43); 0.25*	-0.83 (0.27); 0.44*	
Other Affiliation	-0.05 (0.18)	0 (0.11)	0 (0.34)	0.05 (0.32)	0.01 (0.36)	-0.01 (0.13)	0.02 (0.13)	-1.12 (0.6); 0.33**	-0.19 (0.34); 0.83	
Unaffiliated	-0.01 (0.12)	0.05 (0.07)	-0.14 (0.22)*	-0.12 (0.2)*	-0.08 (0.23)***	-0.09 (0.08)***	-0.01 (0.08)	1.44 (0.24); 4.22*	-0.33 (0.22); 0.72	

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.10$; *** $p < 0.05$.

4.2.6 | Geographic location of university

Geographic differences were also observed, with participants from the West Coast reporting the highest levels of critical reflection ($F(1, 682) = 48.24, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.07$), activism ($F(1, 672) = 15.51, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.02$), traditional political behaviors ($F(1, 632) = 4.38, p = 0.032, R^2 = 0.01$), and behaviors in support of the Black community ($F(1, 679) = 37.2, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.05$). Participants from the West Coast were also more likely to indicate racism as a top concern for the country as compared to those from the Southeast (odds ratio [OR] = 1.64; $p = 0.013$). Notably, participants in the Midwest reported lower levels of critical reflection ($F(1, 682) = 14.77, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.02$), activism ($F(1, 672) = 15.52, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.02$), community-based engagement ($F(1, 652) = 62.04, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.01$) and behaviors in support of the Black community ($F(1, 679) = 21.46, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.03$) compared to those from the Southeast. They were also significantly less likely to intend to vote (OR = 0.4; $p = 0.017$) and to indicate racism as a top concern (OR = 0.52; $p = 0.015$).

4.2.7 | Political party affiliation

Participants who were affiliated with the Republican party reported significantly lower in critical reflection ($F(1, 682) = 271.19, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.29$) and significantly higher SDO beliefs ($F(1, 682) = 76.49, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.1$) compared to participants who were affiliated with the Democrat party. Republican participants also reported significantly lower levels of activism ($F(1, 672) = 63.37, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.09$), traditional political behaviors ($F(1, 632) = 10.13, p = 0.002, R^2 = 0.02$), and behaviors in support of the Black community ($F(1, 679) = 149.76, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.18$) than Democrats. They were also significantly less likely to intend to vote (OR = 0.25; $p < 0.001$) and to indicate racism as a top concern for the country (OR = 0.44; $p < 0.001$) compared to participants who affiliated with the Democrat party. Notably, participants who did not report a political party affiliation engaged in significantly lower levels of activism ($F(1, 672) = 12.82, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.02$), traditional political behaviors ($F(1, 632) = 8.48, p = 0.004, R^2 = 0.01$), community-based behaviors ($F(1, 652) = 4.07, p = 0.044, R^2 = 0.01$), and behaviors in support of the Black community ($F(1, 679) = 6.08, p = 0.014, R^2 = 0.01$) compared to Democrats. Unaffiliated participants were also significantly less likely to intend to vote compared to Democrats (OR = 4.22; $p < 0.001$).

Multivariable regressions were further performed to identify significant association between demographics, civic concerns, and beliefs in relation to civic behaviors within (traditional political, voting) and outside (activism, activism in support of the Black community) of political structures, as well as community-based (see Table 2).

4.2.8 | Demographic characteristics associated with civic behaviors within political structures

Multivariable regressions reflected no significant socio-demographic associations in regard to patterns in civic participation within political structures (traditional political, and intention to vote).

4.2.9 | Demographic trends in association with community-based civic behaviors

Women ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$) and BIYOC ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.01$) tended to report higher engagement in community-based activism as compared to men and participants who identify as White (partially supporting Hypothesis 2). Concerning non-demographic predictors, participants from the Southeast reported higher levels of community-based civic behaviors as compared to their peers in the West Coast ($\beta = -0.10, p < 0.01$) and Midwest ($\beta = -0.1, p < 0.05$).

4.2.10 | Demographic trends in association with civic behaviors outside of political structures

Multivariable regression results showed that women, BIYOC, and LGBQ participants indicated strong association surrounding engaging in one system-challenging civic behavior (i.e., partially supporting Hypothesis 2). Women ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$), BIYOC ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.01$), and LGBQ youth ($\beta = 0.14, p < 0.01$) reported higher levels of engagement in activist forms of civic participation as compared to men as well as participants identifying as White or heterosexual. However, demographic predictors surrounding race, SEP, gender, and sexual orientation were not significant predictors surrounding activism in support of the Black community (i.e., not supporting Hypothesis 2). Younger participants were more likely to engage in activism in specific support for the Black community ($\beta = -0.06, p < 0.05$) as compared to older participants.

4.3 | Research Question 3 (civic beliefs in association with civic behaviors)

4.3.1 | Civic belief trends in association with civic behaviors within political structures

Overall, participants who rated high in SDO beliefs were more likely to engage in civic behaviors operating within the system's existing institutional structures and decision-making processes (partially supporting Hypothesis 3). Specifically, participants who rated higher in SDO ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$) were more likely to report higher levels of engagement in traditional forms of civic participation and also reported an intention to vote at significantly higher odds ($OR = 1.89, p < 0.01$) than those rating lower in SDO beliefs. However, participants rating higher in critical reflection ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.01$) were also more likely to engage in traditional forms of activism (not supporting Hypothesis 3). Participants who were unaffiliated with a political party ($\beta = -0.10, p < 0.05$) were also slightly less likely to engage in traditional political behaviors as compared to participants who identified as Democrats

4.3.2 | Civic beliefs in association with community-engaged civic behaviors

Participants who reported higher levels of critical reflection were more likely to report higher engagement in community-based civic participation ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.01$).

4.3.3 | Civic beliefs in association with civic behaviors outside of political structures

Participants who rated high in critical reflection were more likely to engage in system-challenging civic behaviors (supporting Hypothesis 3A). For instance, those who reported higher levels of critical reflection were more likely to report higher engagement in general activism ($\beta = 0.33, p < 0.01$), and activism in support of the Black community ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.01$). In contrast, young people who endorsed higher beliefs of SDO ($\beta = -0.11, p < 0.01$) were significantly less likely to engage in civic behaviors in support of the Black community. Young people who were not affiliated with a political party ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.01$) were slightly less likely to report engagement in activist forms of civic participation as compared to Democrats. Participants affiliated with the Republican party ($\beta = -0.17, p < 0.01$) were less likely to engage in civic behaviors in support of the Black community compared to their peers affiliated with a party other than Democrat or Republican.

4.4 | Exploratory analysis (COVID-19 in association with civic behaviors)

Lastly, multivariate regression results indicated that impact of COVID-19 exposure was only strongly associated with activism in support of the Black Community ($\beta = 0.09, p < 0.01$).

5 | DISCUSSION

5.1 | What were college students' top concerns for the United States just before the 2020 presidential election?

In line with white papers and recent polling data ("Exit Poll Results," 2020; Brenan, 2020; Miao, 2020; "Northwestern Institute for Policy Research, 2020), our study indicates that racism and social injustice were at the forefront of the minds of college students in our sample preceding the 2020 presidential election. These concerns may have been heightened in the context of growing media coverage surrounding the violence against Black and Brown bodies during the summer of 2020, as well as public discourse regarding racial equity provoked by the presidential race (Chen et al., 2021; Dukes & Gaither, 2017). At the same time, participants also expressed heightened concern for the economy. College students are entering the workforce in the midst of a once-in-a-generation global pandemic. Research indicates that fear surrounding the future has been associated with heightened stress, mood disorders, and greater reliance on substances as a coping mechanism (Charles et al., 2021). Findings from this study have implications for practice in helping instructors acknowledge macro-level stressors within the classroom, refer students to needed resources, scaffold inclusive conversations throughout course curriculum, and strategically plan course content around heightened sociopolitical events. Furthermore, mental health centers would benefit from targeting staffing and centralizing referrals in times of anticipated sociopolitical distress (i.e., contentious elections, public protests), as well as offering innovative health services in partnership with cross-campus collaborations (office of student life, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and faculty who study sociopolitical development).

Concerns surrounding racism were significantly associated with activism and activism in support of the Black community. Concern with social injustice was negatively associated with intention to vote. Such findings may highlight college students' frustration with current institutional structures as a vehicle for social change. Alternatively, results may show college students' disillusionment with the voting process (particularly during the pandemic). Such information has direct implications for practice in informing student programming and creating curricula that provides students with avenues to explore different forms of civic engagement in an effort to holistically work towards social and racial justice.

5.2 | What role do demographic factors play in association with different forms of civic participation?

Prior literature surrounding demographics in relation to civic participation has diverged in the types of civic participation explored (Ballard et al., 2020; Wray-Lake et al., 2020). This study contributes to the growing literature base surrounding demographic factors in association with diverse forms of civic participation with an explicit focus on behaviors operating within and/or challenging existing institutional structures. Our findings challenge past literature (e.g., Mirra & Gracia, 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2011) by indicating that individuals who occupy socio-demographic positionalities facing historical and ongoing targeted oppression are more likely to engage in specific civic behaviors (i.e., community-based, general activism, and activism in support of the black community) as compared to those with more system-privileging identities. Such identities have experienced the heavy economic, physical, and mental health burdens of the pandemic (Cooper & Williams, 2020), thus potentially making civic

participation more salient to their everyday experiences and highlighting potential intersecting struggles in relation to systems of oppression. Results expand our understanding of potential trends in participation among college students' engagement in activism in support of the Black community. Specifically, women, LBGQ youth, younger adults, and Democrats were more likely to engage in activism in support of the Black community. Results help inform new research on activism and allyship in support of the Black community which has been previously focused on civic participation amongst Black youth (Hope et al., 2019).

Demographic trends were less evident in predicting civic behaviors operating within existing institutional structures (traditional political behavior and voting). Recent polling data indicates that activism centered around voter turnout and community outreach has reached new levels of national attention, yielding unprecedented participation rates from historically minoritized communities (CIRCLE, 2020). Thus, voting and organizing surrounding voting in the current socio-political climate may blur the lines between "within the system" and "outside of the system" civic participation previously identified within the literature (Medenica & Fowler, 2020). For instance, community organizing around issues of voter suppression is inherently tied to challenging systemic racial injustice (Combs, 2016). These findings differ from some prior academic literature surrounding demographic factors and civic participation operating within existing systems typically consisting of White male participants (Jenkins, 2005; Mirra & Garica, 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2011), and instead highlights more diverse participation among young people surrounding voting and traditional political behavior.

5.3 | What role do civic beliefs play in the forms of civic participation in which college students chose to participate?

Findings complement prior literature highlighting the connection between civic beliefs and distinct types of civic participation (Metzger et al., 2014; Oosterhoff et al., 2017), yet offer additional dimensions of civic participation (activism in general as well as in support of the Black community). Critical reflection was significantly associated with community-based civic participation, traditional political participation, general activism, and activism in support of the Black community. Corroborating prior literature, awareness of structural inequities may provide college students with unique frameworks, ideas, and leverage points in pushing for social change both within and outside of traditional forms of civic participation (Heberle et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2011). SDO was significantly associated with traditional political civic behaviors and intentions to vote indicating that individuals who endorse existing societal hierarchies might view voting as an avenue to promote such beliefs. This finding supports prior literature indicating individuals who rate high in SDO typically endorse civic activity within existing political systems (see Metzger et al., 2014). However, our study also provided a unique contribution to this literature, finding that individuals who rated higher in SDO beliefs were more likely to be against activism that pushed for change surrounding existing social inequities (i.e., justice for the Black community).

Our findings surrounding party affiliation expanded prior literature (Wray-Lake et al., 2019) in relation to distinct types of civic participation. Our study indicates that Democrats are more likely to engage in general activism and activism in support of the Black community as compared to Republicans. The ongoing politicization surrounding the recognition of racial injustice is concerning within the context of higher education in which many college courses (e.g., sociology, history, criminal justice, and teacher education) may explore documented histories and ongoing systems of oppression. Such courses are particularly important for college students pursuing credentials in teacher education and may introduce similar topics to their primary students while navigating the recent politicization surrounding discussing such topics within school settings. Further preparing faculty and student affairs programming through resources and strategies to discuss such issues with students possessing varying political orientations and civic beliefs could be beneficial in advancing cross-party dialogue as well as enhancing student openness to exploring such concepts. Furthermore, critical consciousness (specifically critical reflection) may be a

particularly valuable competency and skill set embedded within undergraduate education, allowing students a framework with which to analyze social issues and identify multiple pathways of civic action.

5.4 | Explorations surrounding COVID-19 exposure and civic participation

This study adds to the emerging literature set exploring young peoples' civic participation and activism in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (such as Fine et al., 2021). Specifically, we found that individuals who reported greater stressors surrounding COVID-19 on the health and well-being of themselves and their families were more likely to engage in activism in support of the Black community. Perhaps the experience of the pandemic heightened these participants' awareness of existing social injustices, promoting their desire to engage in activism pushing for social change through nontraditional civic channels. Fine et al. (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic created a *critical pivot point* for young people engaged in a youth-led participatory action research project, shifting their focus to social and racial injustices impacting their community, and direct community-based participation (i.e., gathering food and other basic necessities for community members). Further research is needed to explore the impact of the pandemic on the long-term civic trajectories of young people.

5.4.1 | Limitations

This study had several limitations, creating openings for future research and inquiry. First, data were cross-sectional. Thus, causal inferences between civic beliefs, concerns, and civic participation cannot be made. Future research would benefit from exploring longitudinal pathways between demographics, civic beliefs, civic concerns, and civic participation. Second, the demographic sample sizes were restricted, limiting our ability to examine a more nuanced picture of specific demographic trends regarding racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities in relation to different forms of civic participation. Larger sample sizes and strategic purposive sampling regarding diversity are needed to explore the nuances of intersecting identities in relation to systems of oppression (e.g., the unique and distinct experiences of LGBQ and BIYOC) surrounding civic participation. We recognize the limitations in this study associated with binarizing groups, which restricts the ability to capture specific differences in demographic classification and explore more intersecting interactions. Furthermore, sampling was not representative of college students. Thus, findings may be particularly skewed towards participants with greater civic aspirations and interest in political engagement due to the nature of the survey. Lastly, this study was conducted with students attending four-year colleges. While students at four-year colleges are becoming more diverse in income and race/ethnicity (Monarrez & Washington, 2020), they are still more likely to be middle-class, White, democratic-leaning, and report more frequent civic activities (specifically voting) as compared to noncollege youth (Syvertsen et al., 2011). Additional research is needed to intentionally survey young people attending trade school programs and those currently in the workforce to fully capture trends in civic participation.

6 | IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Uncovering links between sociodemographic factors, civic beliefs, concerns, and civic behaviors among college students can be useful for understanding the developmental experiences that support civic behaviors. Findings suggest the role of demographic factors, impacted by both privileging and oppressive systems, is associated with distinct types of civic participation. Furthermore, opportunities to promote critical reflection are strongly associated with a range of diverse forms of civic participation. Taking these findings into consideration, college campuses could provide opportunities to foster young people's civic knowledge and participation. For instance, universities

could provide faculty with resources to help guide conversations surrounding current events and identify unique avenues for student civic engagement. Offices of Student Life or resident assistants in campus housing could help educate students about absentee voting and/or registering to vote at their local college residence, and universities can consider canceling classes on election day to promote participation and awareness during national elections. Student affairs might also consider facilitating workshops to help students explore current social issues, understand the avenues in which they can exercise agency, and practice engaging in deliberative and open dialogue.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (#1014189).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is not publicly available. The authors encourage readers to contact them surrounding data inquiries.

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