

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The team at Phone2Action is committed to providing advocacy professionals with industry-leading research. That's why the State of Advocacy report was born: to provide insight drawn from the millions of actions taken annually on the Phone2Action platform.

While the report is traditionally a year-over-year analysis, meaning this year's report would compare 2018 and 2019 data, the extraordinary events of 2020 warranted additional work. The Phone2Action team spent three months analyzing data from January to June to understand the tectonic changes in advocacy that took place this year. What we found was dramatic.

A new advocacy landscape has emerged that will profoundly shape digital grassroots activity in the years ahead. The world of Washington influence has undergone massive change.

Here are the major findings.

Digital Advocacy Exploded in 2020

Fueled by fears over the pandemic, frustrations over racial injustice and perhaps the most contentious election in a generation, the records for most major metrics were shattered.

- **Activity.** 14 million actions were taken on the Phone2Action platform from January to June, a record by any measure. That was 8 times the number in 2016, the last presidential election, and 32 percent more than that same period in 2019. Organizations directed an unprecedented volume of email, phone calls and social media posts to elected officials.
- **Participation.** Organizations recruited more new advocates in the first half of 2020 than ever before, bringing a whopping 3.4 million people into the process. That's a 121-percent increase over a comparable period in 2018 and a 306-percent increase over 2016, the last two major election years.
- **Connections.** More connections were made between activists and elected officials—emails, tweets and phone calls—in the first half of 2020 than in any other period since Phone2Action began collecting data. More than 12.6 million connections were made, a 78-percent increase over a comparable period in 2018 and a 952-percent increase over 2016. The volume of advocacy email alone went from 7 million in the last half of 2019 to 12.4 million in the first half of 2020.

2020 Continued a Years-Long Trend

The boom in 2020 built upon years of steady growth in digital advocacy, growth that was strong in 2019 even before the events of 2020 spiked activity. Roughly 4.6 million advocates took action of all kinds last year, a 30-percent increase over 2018, according to a cohort analysis.

‘The COVID Effect’ Was a Major Driver

When America declared a state of emergency over the pandemic on March 13, it marked the beginning of a dramatic increase in digital advocacy on the Phone2Action platform. We call the increase in activity between March 13 and May 30 “the COVID Effect.”

During the peak, 20,000 more people took action every day than in a comparable period before the emergency declaration. Overall, a total of 52,000 people took action every day in this peak period—roughly 36 people every minute. Some additional highlights:

- **Activity.** More than 2.3 million people took action in this period, a 56-percent increase over the same period in 2019. A majority of those were new advocates.
- **Participation.** New advocates increased to almost 2 million, a 41-percent increase over 2019. This was most prominent in associations, which saw new advocates grow 363 percent.
- **Conversion.** Conversion rates, meaning the percentage of supporters who take action on an advocacy request, almost tripled, growing from 6 percent before March 13 to 16 percent after.
- **Connections.** More than 7 million total messages were sent to elected officials at the federal, state and local level, a 41-percent increase over 2019.

Many Factors Drove the Increase

Several factors drove the increase in digital advocacy, some related to the pandemic and some not.

- **Protests.** Polling shows that between 15 million and 26 million¹ Americans took part in a protest after George Floyd’s death. That activism also drove up digital advocacy. Black Futures Lab—an organization started by Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement—saw a campaign grow 73 times larger.
- **Lobbying Disruption.** Washington lobbying was a \$3.5 billion industry² in 2019. That industry paused when social distancing halted face-to-face meetings, and then restarted using virtual tools. Many organizations turned to digital advocacy to augment traditional lobbying.
- **Existential Threat.** Some industries, such as restaurants, saw catastrophic declines in business. This required a response from the associations that represent these industries. The National Restaurant Association, for example, mobilized almost 200,000 people who sent almost half a million messages to Congress.
- **Government Aid.** Congress itself helped boost digital advocacy when it passed three pandemic relief bills containing a staggering \$3 trillion in aid to industries and families. Many organizations advocated hard for inclusion.
- **The Election.** The 2020 election promises to be the most divisive in a generation, deciding control of both the White House and Congress. Despite pandemic-related disruptions, primary season drove an increase in digital advocacy. From January to June, activity grew by 347 percent—more than triple—over a similar period in 2018.

¹According to [The New York Times](#).

²According to the [Center for Responsive Politics](#).



Activism Is Changing: Meet ‘The New Citizen’

The nature of protests is changing worldwide. What were once organized events with identifiable leaders have become fluid, leaderless outpourings driven by technology. Phone2Action Co-Founder Ximena Hartsock calls these activists the New Citizen. “Their action is connective rather than collective,” she said.

We Are Operating In A New Advocacy Landscape

Digital grassroots advocacy is becoming a necessary tool for organizations that conduct advocacy. It is reshaping the advocacy landscape. Here’s what that landscape looks like.

- **Virtual Events are the Norm.** Lawmakers are now conducting virtual town halls and many organizations have moved their conferences online. The Zoom call, or some equivalent, is ubiquitous.
- **Mobile Action is Growing.** Even with people working from home, mobile usage on advocacy campaigns increased this year. From March 13 to May 30, roughly 70 percent of supporters who responded to an advocacy campaign did so using a mobile device. That’s up from 63 percent before COVID struck.
- **Social Shares are a Primary Channel.** Sharing advocacy campaigns on social networks has emerged as one of the most powerful tools that organizations can use. From March 13 to May 30, advocacy shares on Facebook grew more than 287 percent over the pre-COVID period from December 25 to March 12. Shares on Twitter jumped 113 percent in that same time.
- **Text Messaging is Replacing Email.** Email remains advocacy’s primary engine, but text messaging is powerful. Text messaging, which has a 99-percent open rate, saw a major boost during the pandemic, with the average conversion rate almost doubling to 11 percent, according to data gathered March 13 to June 10.
- **State-Level Advocacy is More Important Than Ever.** State advocacy increased in the post-pandemic landscape. This is likely in response to actions by governors and state lawmakers who sought to mitigate the coronavirus and its economic impact. From March 13 to May 30, 330,000 advocates took almost 900,000 actions in states nationwide. That’s a 91-percent increase in advocates taking action over the period before COVID.
- **Local Advocacy is Thriving.** Local advocacy increased as organizations targeted mayors, city councils and county officials who regulate their business. The number of advocates taking action at the local level more than doubled from March 13 to May 30, growing 148 percent over the same period in 2019. In fact, there was more local advocacy in the first six months of 2020 than in all of 2019.



ACQUISITION: Associations Led in Recruiting

Roughly 3.4 million people participated in advocacy for the first time using Phone2Action and about two thirds—almost 2 million people—did so in the aftermath of the pandemic (March 13 to May 30). Associations were the clear winner, accounting for 34 percent of these “acquisitions,” as new advocates are sometimes called. For example, the American Nurses Association grew their list by more than 115,000 supporters.

MOBILIZATION: Nonprofits Lead in Activity

From January to June, almost 4.8 million people were mobilized on advocacy campaigns. Nonprofits mobilized the lion’s share at 2.8 million people, more people than associations and companies combined. Environmental nonprofits were extremely active, accounting for four of the top organizations who mobilized the most advocates. Together, the League of Conservation Voters, the Environmental Defense Fund, EarthJustice and the National Parks Conservation Association mobilized a collective 530,000 advocates across 146 campaigns.

MOBILIZATION: Gig Economy Companies Drive Activity

While companies mobilized fewer advocates than associations or nonprofits, many companies were active and mobilized tens of thousands of advocates. A cohort of companies we analyzed in 2019 and 2020 increased the number of advocates sending messages to lawmakers by 34 percent. Perhaps most prominent were companies that are part of the sharing economy or “gig economy.” Gig-economy companies made up four of the top companies who mobilized the most advocates in the first half of 2020, including Etsy, Expedia Group (owner of the VRBO home sharing service) and Uber.

Retention Rates are Strong Across the Board

The rate of return, which shows the percentage of supporters who come back to take action multiple times, is a good indicator of whether organizations retain the advocates they attract. Overall, the rate of return for organizations using the Phone2Action platform increased in the first half of 2020, according to a cohort analysis. The average rate of return for corporations increased by 78 percent more in the first half of 2020 than it was in a comparable period in 2019. The rate of return for nonprofits increased by 20 percent and the rate for associations was 17 percent.

Looking To 2021

The tumult that gripped America in 2020 will continue in the year ahead. A divisive election is coming in which results could be delayed or disputed. The winners must craft America’s response to the pandemic and its economic recovery, meaning new policies, regulations and bills lie ahead. State lawmakers will continue to legislate. Governors will make proclamations. Regulators will make changes to industry. And dozens of decisions are coming on major policy issues eclipsed by the pandemic, such as immigration, climate change, gun control and education. There will be no shortage of issues and events to drive advocacy.