



KEY FINDINGS FROM JUST CAPITAL'S 2021 FOCUS GROUPS

APRIL 2021

OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

OBJECTIVES

Every year, JUST Capital begins the research process by holding focus groups with a diverse cross-section of the American public. During these facilitated conversations with Americans, **we seek to understand what people expect from corporate America and how they define a “just” company.** These groups yield rich, qualitative insights into the values people wish to see corporate behavior embody, particularly in how companies treat workers, customers, shareholders, communities, and the environment.

ISSUES EXPLORED



➤ What are Americans’ expectations regarding just **business behavior**?
What specific behaviors are considered just or unjust?



➤ How have **events of the last year impacted expectations** for companies and the definition of just behavior, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and racial equality?



➤ What are the public’s reactions to specific topics such as **fair wages, gig/contract work, or caregiving**?



➤ What role does the public believe companies should play in speaking out on social issues, including those focused on **government and democracy**?

OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

2021 FOCUS GROUPS

Between February 16 and 23, 2021, The Harris Poll and JUST Capital conducted eight two-hour focus groups held virtually.

-  | 6-8 participants each
-  | 3 groups: General Population
-  | 1 group: Black & African Americans
-  | 1 group: Conservatives
-  | 1 group: Hispanic Americans
-  | 1 group: Women
-  | 1 group: Hourly Workers

In order to hear from the broadest possible representation of perspectives from the American public, participants are recruited across demographics – including gender, ethnicity, income, location, education, political beliefs, and more. The 2021 groups were held online due to restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Not being tied to geography gave us the added opportunity to talk to both mixed and single-demographic groups.



EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE AMERICA

The public's priorities are not different from years past, but instead amplified, due to COVID-19.

POSITIVE SOCIETAL IMPACT CONTINUES TO BE AN EXPECTATION FOR LARGE COMPANIES, AS THEY HAVE THE RESOURCES TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

- Areas of impact frequently mentioned by participants include fair pay, workforce treatment, customer treatment, and environmental impact, as well as leading with integrity by taking ownership of mistakes.

HOW COMPANIES SHOULD RESPOND IN A CRISIS



Many companies went above and beyond in supporting their stakeholders during COVID-19, and now the public expects companies to continue doing so, even in non-crisis times. Also, if a company is somehow responsible for a crisis or embroiled in a controversy, Americans want to see that company do right by its customers, employees, and community.

COVID-19 changed the landscape for corporate America, making it more urgent than ever that companies prioritize stakeholder capitalism in America today. Specifically:

Valuing Employees



The pandemic highlighted the need for increased wages and better health and safety measures for American workers, as well as the productivity benefits of working from home.

Valuing Customers



Properly protecting customers (enforcing masks and social distancing) has become a standard expectation for companies while we continue to navigate the pandemic.

Valuing Communities



Participants were impressed by companies that stepped up in myriad ways to support Americans – making masks, sanitizer, ventilators, etc. – even when the government didn't mandate their actions.

CAPITALISM IN AMERICA TODAY

Most believe capitalism does work. That said, there is still more work to be done.

Some believe capitalism is the most effective system, and that those who put in the work will reap rewards.

“I like the fact that I can make my own way. Let’s say I’m at this point, it’s been 10 years and I grow this company to be a \$10 million a year company. Why should I pay more taxes and give more and not be rich when I earned my own money?”

– HISPANIC AMERICANS GROUP

“I would say if you’re willing to put in the work, you can succeed, and success is a personal definition.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

Others recognize capitalism is not perfect, but better than the alternatives.

“I think we can see income and wealth inequality is just skyrocketing way higher than it’s ever been. I feel like it’s harder to just get by in America, and I think a lot of the wealth that we do build is really temporary... So it just feels like a lot of the tenets of Capitalism that we agreed to are proving to be untrue from what I’ve seen.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

“I’d like to know what the alternative is. What’s the next best thing to capitalism?”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

EXPECTATIONS FOR CORPORATE ACTION ON RACIAL EQUITY

The past year has shown Americans that companies have a responsibility to advance racial equity in America.

Americans – in particular, Black Americans – expect more than mere statements of support for advancing racial equity and seek real, tangible action from corporations. There will be no lasting change without actions to address corporate accountability.

- Externally, Black Americans want to see products and communications become significantly more inclusive of BIPOC.
- Internally, there needs to be visible change in the hiring, promotion, and advancement of Black employees, including at the Executive and Board levels.

Ben & Jerry's had a seven-step plan that listed the things that they were going to do to support [BLM]. This is a just company saying, "I know we're going to get some pushback from this, but in this community, this is an important thing right now. We're not just going to put a banner on the ice cream."

– BLACK & AFRICAN AMERICANS GROUP

"I want to see someone like myself in the decision-making position and not just someone that's a worker per se. I need someone who actually has a say in how the company runs in a managerial position, in a board position...Because then I know when I see that we have a seat at the table."

– BLACK & AFRICAN AMERICANS GROUP

CORPORATE RESPONSE TO MATTERS OF RACIAL EQUITY



There is growing demand that companies support a movement toward greater racial justice by advancing equity in their workplaces. But speaking up without concrete action is more likely to be perceived negatively than not speaking out at all.

Black Americans are demanding more tangible action from companies with regard to racial equity – changes in policies, communications, hiring, and products. If companies aren't acting in the way they expect, they're willing to take their dollars elsewhere.

FAIR WAGES

A “fair” wage is based on skill level and cost of living.

WE ASKED: WHAT DOES A FAIR WAGE OR FAIR PAY MEAN TO YOU?

“[The proposed \$15 federal minimum wage] comes out to about \$31,000 a year. Is that enough for the average family of four? In rural Mississippi, sure. In San Francisco, no. There needs to be kind of a bare minimum of paying enough so that someone can meet the cost of living.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

“I don’t know anyone who would want to be paid less than a living wage and feel happy about the company.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

A “fair wage” is defined as one that is **commensurate with the skill** of the employee, but also reflects **the cost of living in a particular geographic area**.

In discussing the possibility of a **\$15 minimum wage**, most participants agreed that it isn’t enough to support an entire family in our country today.

Most define the term “**living wage**” to mean “**able to live**” on that wage and not having to take another job or go on public assistance to make ends meet.

Many recognize that paying workers more may affect profits in the short term, but ultimately has **positive, long-term benefits** in increased worker loyalty.

CAREGIVING

Balancing parenting and work has always been a challenge for women, but is now even more complex due to COVID-19.

“I don't think that the employer is necessarily responsible for it, but it'd be nice if they did offer more of a flexible workday or that type of thing.”

– WOMEN GROUP

“As females in the workforce, that will always be something that could improve: affordable childcare.”

– WOMEN GROUP

COVID-19 has greatly impacted caregiving, pulling parents (especially women) out of the workforce, thereby impacting household finances.

Respondents see caregiving as primarily the responsibility of the parent, but anything employers can do to help balance the needs of caregiving with work is very much appreciated, whether it be childcare options or scheduling.

Being a working parent is a balance of predictability and flexibility. A consistent schedule helps to plan for childcare, but when issues arise (child illness, school closures), that schedule needs to have some give.

“If you work at a big corporation, they should offer something to the employees because we are helping you make money. We either have to spend all of our money for our kids to have somewhere to go while we're here at work, or we can't work.”

– BLACK & AFRICAN AMERICANS GROUP

GIG AND CONTRACT WORKERS

Companies should protect the health and safety of their gig and contract workers.

MOST AGREE THAT A COMPANY HAS A BASIC RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT ITS ENTIRE WORKFORCE.

- A company must, at a minimum, guarantee the health and safety of its workers (including gig workers), especially during the pandemic.
- As a caveat, focus group participants understood workforce protection to mean providing proper PPE to gig and contract workers, not necessarily providing health care insurance to this group.

COMPANIES THAT HIRE GIG AND CONTRACT WORKERS ARE NOT NECESSARILY SEEN AS UNJUST.

- Those who have personally worked for **on-demand** companies appreciate the freedom and flexibility these jobs can provide workers. Others mention that companies that primarily employ gig workers offer customers value by lowering rates and increasing convenience.
- At the same time, others express concern that the model has changed, making it easier for companies to exploit gig and contract workers by not providing a base level of protection. A few recognize that for some, stringing together a series of gig and contract work is the only way to make enough to earn a living.

“[Workers] are giving their time, their effort, their energy to the company. Maybe you're not paying the highest wage or you may not have the best benefits – but at the very least you should be guaranteeing their health and safety.”

– HOURLY WORKERS GROUP

” ... I don't know if Uber or Lyft are even making a profit at this point, yet, but when they have apparent success with that model, it influences other companies to do the same thing, and it creates a nation of serfs who just have to drift from gig to gig and maybe go without healthcare.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

TRANSPARENCY

Corporate transparency is important to Americans, and they want companies to be honest and open about disclosure.

BY AND LARGE, AMERICANS BELIEVE COMPANIES CAN AND SHOULD DO THE RIGHT THING.

When pressed, most know that transparency and disclosure will be imperfect, but best efforts can and should be made.

TRANSPARENCY IS HIGHLY IMPORTANT, BUT DIFFICULT TO ASSESS.

The only time Americans really understand transparency is when it's lacking. Many mention difficulty in finding reliable information about a company apart from controversies or breaches of trust reported in the news.

“One thing that I do look for in companies is transparency when it comes to our data. They're collecting a lot more than we're giving them, and you can't stop them from it. What are you doing with that data? Who are you selling it to?”

– HOURLY WORKERS GROUP

“It's hard to really find out the full picture of what a company is doing and then choose to invest your money in it. I know there's databases out there where you can kind of look up the company's practices and stuff... But it'd be hard to sort through everything and track it all down.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

“Just be honest and don't hide behind your corporate lawyers. What are your employees' working conditions? What specifically are you doing in the community? What are you doing for the environment? Tell us specifically what it is that you've done.”

– HOURLY WORKERS GROUP

TAKING A STAND ON POLITICAL ISSUES

Due to recent events, perceptions are shifting on whether companies should be involved in political matters.

While many prefer to see corporations stay away from influencing politics...

“If the question is, should [corporations] influence politics and government? I say absolutely not because then that creates a weird pressure that's completely unnecessary, in my opinion. Then the country becomes a business as well.”

– CONSERVATIVES GROUP

...the events of January 6th demonstrated that companies sometimes need to take a stand in order to be considered just.

“I think corporations need to stay of politics as much as possible, but if something crosses the line – and I think as a nation we recognize when someone's crossing the line – companies should take a stand. I'm glad a lot of companies did.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

“I think all corporations should have stepped up and tried to calm the situation as much as they could. Being silent is not doing anything. It's the people that had power that did not step in that really got me.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

TAKING A STAND ON POLITICAL ISSUES

Due to recent events, perceptions are shifting on whether companies should be involved in political matters.

Respondents consider corporate lobbying to be akin to advocating for one's business.

- Lobbying, as it is understood by most, is seen as advocating for the issues important to one's business, which the public considers acceptable.

“Lobbying doesn't cause [corporate leadership] to own the politicians, whereas giving them money does.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

However, corporations that give money to politicians are seen as unfairly influencing political leaders to act in a way that is favorable to the company.

- Giving money directly to a candidate is perceived as “buying” a politician or using company money to represent a single person's views (likely the CEO or another C-suite executive).

“Giving money feels corrupt, lobbying feels like human nature.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

TAXES

Many feel that larger companies need to pay their fair share of taxes in order to support the society that supports them.

THE CONCEPT OF A CORPORATION PAYING ITS “FAIR SHARE” OF TAXES IS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE, AS MANY ARE SAVVY ABOUT TAX BREAKS, LOOPHOLES, AND INCENTIVES.

Most say that companies have a responsibility to society and that paying their fair share of taxes is critical to fulfilling that responsibility.

STILL, OTHERS THINK IT’S ACCEPTABLE FOR COMPANIES TO TAKE ANY TAX BREAKS THAT ARE LEGALLY AVAILABLE TO THEM.

These respondents aren’t sure that taxes are the best way to support communities and see supporting consumers and employees directly as being a better way to keep the money in the community.

“I think it’s important because we’re all in this together... We all make a living. We all do our part to shore up the government and all the programs and opportunities that they put forth for us. So why shouldn’t a company be held accountable for paying their fair share of taxes on the profits or just on the income that they make?”

– CONSERVATIVES GROUP

It seems like the larger corporations get just such massive tax breaks. I’m a small business owner. I’ve got some employees and I see the pack of taxes that I pay and sometimes it just kind of doesn’t seem fair. With all those tax breaks, I would think that it’s their responsibility to give back too.”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

“I’m going to need [companies] to help out a little more than you are by only paying your “fair share” of taxes. Roads need to be taken care of. Police need to be paid. The air ... If you are in a better financial position to help the country you live in, why not?”

– GENERAL POPULATION GROUP

ABOUT JUST CAPITAL

The mission of JUST Capital, an independent nonprofit, is to build an economy that works for all Americans by helping companies improve how they serve all their stakeholders – workers, customers, communities, the environment, and shareholders. We believe that business and markets can and must be a greater force for good, and that by shifting the resources of the \$19 trillion private sector, we can address systemic issues at scale, including income inequality and lack of opportunity. Guided by the priorities of the public, our research, rankings, indexes, and data-driven tools help measure and improve corporate performance in the stakeholder economy. To learn more about how data-driven insights are creating a more just future for capitalism, visit: www.JUSTCapital.com.

ABOUT THE HARRIS POLL

The Harris Poll is a global consulting and market research firm that strives to reveal the authentic values of modern society to inspire leaders to create a better tomorrow. Harris works in three primary areas: Building twenty-first-century corporate reputation, crafting brand strategy and performance tracking, and earning organic media through public relations research. The Harris Poll leads one of the longest-running surveys in the U.S. tracking public opinion, motivations and social sentiment since 1963. The JUST Capital/Harris Poll partnership leverages Harris' market research expertise and JUST Capital's data, analysis, and tools to create a unique and powerful platform for measuring public opinion on corporate purpose and social impact, and helping companies improve performance on the issues that matter most in a stakeholder-driven economy.

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