

# Reactive Giving

Understanding the Surge  
in Cause-Related Giving



# 1 Overview: Why Care?

As those who work in philanthropy know, donors are nearly always emotionally engaged with their charitable causes, and donations come as much from the heart as the head. They want to do what they can, hoping every bit makes a difference. We've counseled many non-profits over the years - tell your success stories, don't be all doom and gloom, let donors know they are making a difference!

Yet, throughout 2017 we heard and saw many cause-related nonprofit organizations experience a significant uptick in giving. The conventional wisdom is this uptick was driven by the current political climate in which people felt a greater sense of urgency to defend causes and beliefs that are under threat. Many in the industry nicknamed this surge in contributions "rage donating" or "rage philanthropy." *So we couldn't help but wonder, was rage giving real? And if it was, how long could this rage last?*

As we dug deeper into the data, we discovered the term "rage giving" is far too limiting. While rage may have fueled the initial desire to give, it's really a broader range of emotions that captures the true essence of this type of giving - sadness, hope, joy, empowerment, etc. We've decided the more appropriate term is "reactive giving."

Why care about this study? We believe the moment of giving matters. What brings a supporter to you could be the key to how to keep them. In this study we sought to understand the attitudes, values, and practices of donors when it comes to reactive giving. More specifically, we sought answers to these questions:

- Is reactive giving real?
- Who are these reactive givers?
- What are the emotional triggers for this type of giving?
- Who are the main beneficiaries of reactive giving?
- Can we expect reactive giving to continue?
- And importantly, will these reactive donors transition to loyal supporters?

We explored these questions with a representative sample of 895 donors in the United States across all age segments who made at least one donation to a nonprofit organization in the previous 12 months. The online survey data collection took place between December 5-30, 2017.

IN LIGHT OF THE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN THIS COUNTRY, THAT I REALLY DISAGREE WITH, IT HAS PUSHED ME TO DONATE TO CAUSES THAT ARE NEGATIVELY IMPACTING THE COUNTRY.

-Quote from Reactive Giver

I THOUGHT I SHOULD GET MORE INVOLVED. NOT WAIT FOR SOMEONE ELSE TO COME UP WITH SOME KIND OF SOLUTION.

-Quote from Reactive Giver

I'M NOT A RAGEFUL PERSON, BUT THINGS GOING ON RIGHT NOW HAVE ELICITED RAGE. I'M VERY UPSET AT SITUATIONS PEOPLE ARE BEING PUT IN.

-Quote from Reactive Giver

## 2 Key Findings

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### Reactive giving is real.

Two-in-ten (21 percent) US donors who contributed to causes in 2017 did so at least once because they believed current political events threatened causes or beliefs near and dear to their hearts.

### Reactive givers are across party lines.

Those surveyed who donated in a reactive manner to current social and political events are disproportionately Democrats (53 percent), but still a third (32 percent) identify as Independents, and more than one-in-ten (16 percent) as Republicans.

### Reactive giving brought in new donors.

Donors who reactively gave a charitable gift in 2017 were twice as likely as other donors to be first-time donors. The majority of reactive givers gave to issues, causes, or organizations they had **never** before supported financially.

### Reactive giving brought in young donors.

While every generation has reactive givers, younger donors were much more likely to have given this way. Nearly a third (31 percent) reported such a donation, compared to fewer than twenty percent among other generations.

### Reactive givers are more diverse than typical charitable givers.

Twenty (20) percent of reactive donors in the survey are African-American, compared to 14 percent of givers overall.

### Hope and empowerment are strong emotions.

While anger may be an emotion that propelled donors to take notice of an issue, the *main reason* reactive donors cited for ultimately making a charitable contribution is driven by two different emotions: hope (63 percent) and empowerment (58 percent). Anger fueled only 26 percent of reactive givers.

### Reactive giving benefitted progressive organizations the most.

The main causes donors gave to revolved around anti-poverty, anti-hate, racial justice, LGBTQ equality, and environmental issues.

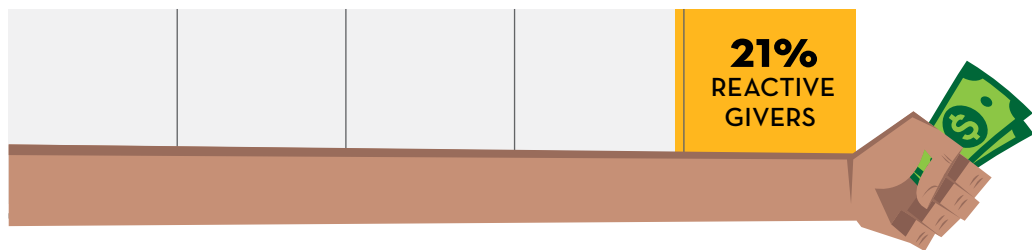
# 3 Reactive Giving: A Closer Look

## Is reactive giving real?

Let's start with the most obvious question: Is reactive giving a real thing? Is there a trend of giving to nonprofit organizations because of an emotional response to the current political and social climate? The answer is yes.

Chart 1 shows the percent of donors who made a charitable contribution to a cause-based organization because they felt their beliefs were under threat due to unfolding political and social events in 2017. One in every five donors surveyed did so.

**Chart 1:** Percent of donors who reactively gave to a cause in 2017



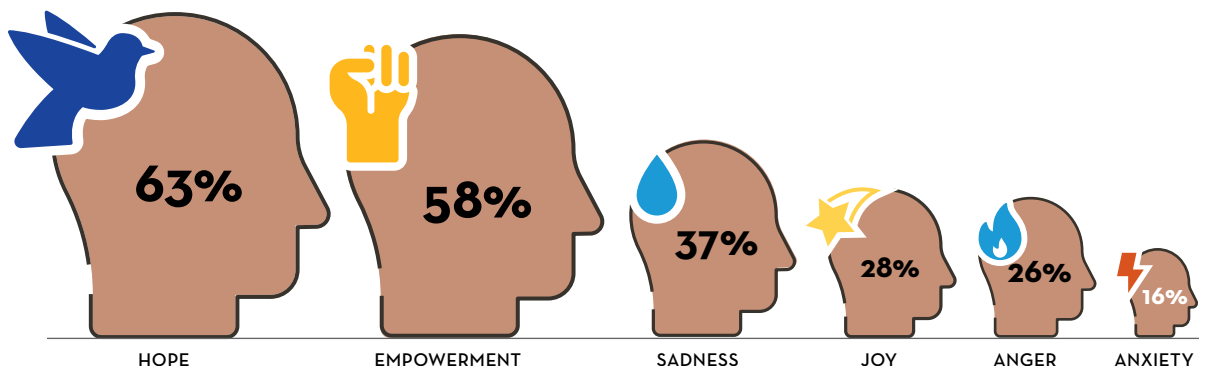
## What triggered this response?

We all respond in different ways to different emotional stimuli. This survey reveals that over the last year, a variety of triggers pushed donors to action. For some reactive givers, the emotional response was anger (26 percent) or anxiety (16 percent) but for others the emotion that compels the act of donating is very different.

More respondents cited hope (63 percent) and empowerment (58 percent) as the driving emotional force behind their 2017 giving. So, while some media outlets and organizations referred to this as “rage giving,” we think a more appropriate term is “reactive giving,” which encompasses the range of emotions that motivate people to support the causes and beliefs that they feel are threatened.

Chart 2 looks at emotions that drove reactive giving.

**Chart 2:** Emotional triggers that drove reactive giving by donors

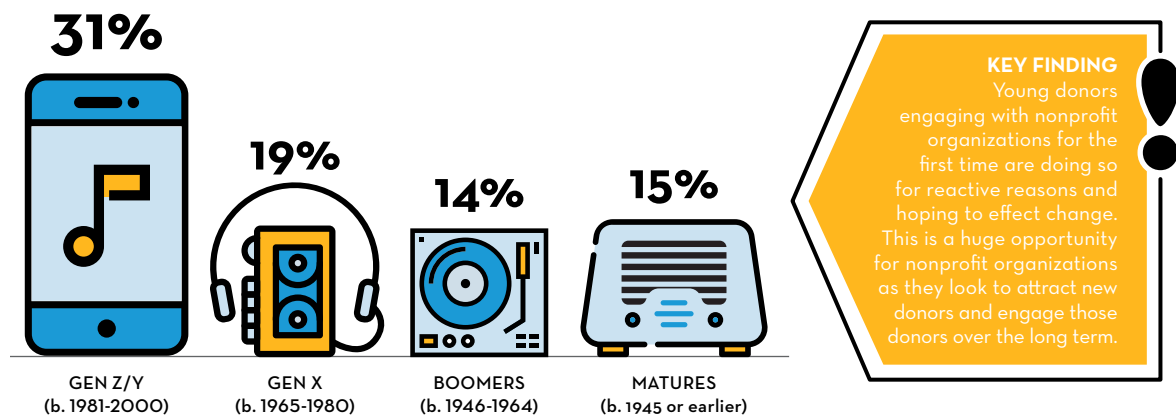


### Who are these reactive givers?

By and large, reactive givers are young, identify as Democrats, and are much more likely to be first-time donors. More than half (54 percent) of reactive givers have given to organizations/causes they have not supported before.

Generation Z (b. 1996-2000) and Generation Y (b. 1981-1995) have the highest proportion of reactive givers – a third (31 percent) of donors from these generations made a reactive gift last year. For context, only 15 percent of Mature (b. 1945 or earlier) donors gave reactively, 14 percent of Baby Boomers (b. 1946-1964), and 19 percent of Generation X (b. 1965-1980). Chart 3 looks at reactive giving by generation. Chart 4 looks at first-time donors who gave reactively versus those who did not.

**Chart 3:** Percent of each generation that give reactively



**Chart 4:** First-time donors

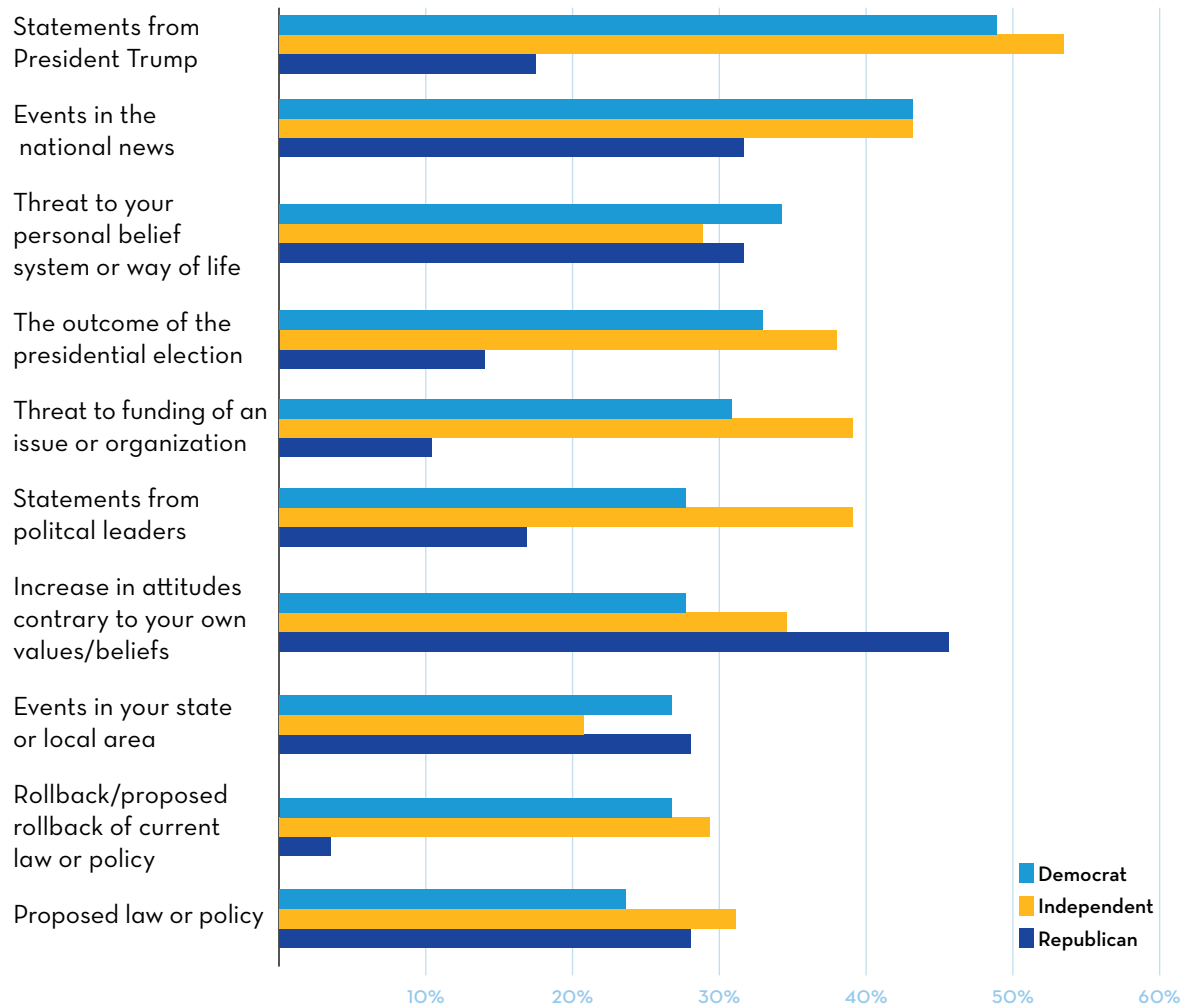


From a political persuasion, while a majority of reactive givers (53 percent) claimed Democratic affiliation, it's interesting to note that still 16 percent identified as Republican – with the other third (32 percent) claiming no party affiliation.

The reasons for giving reactively also differed between Democrat, Republican and Independent donors, with Democrats (48 percent) and Independents (53 percent) citing reactions to statements from President Trump as the primary reason. Republicans cited an increase in attitudes contrary to their beliefs and values (45 percent) as the main reason for reactive giving.

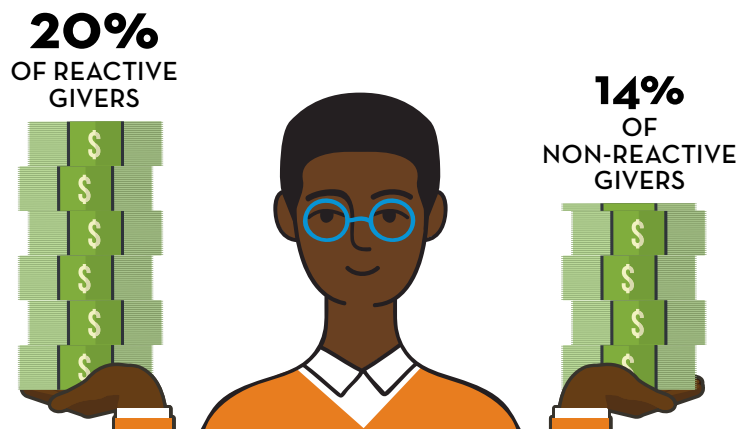
Chart 5 looks at reactive giving by political affiliation and the main drivers for reactive giving.

**Chart 5:** Political affiliation and reactive giving, reasons for reactive giving



Interestingly, 20 percent of reactive givers are African-American, versus 14 percent of donors overall. Non-white reactive donors were twice as likely as white reactive donors to respond to a direct request from a person or organization - showing the power of direct outreach to this community. Chart 6 looks at African-American donors as a share of reactive donors versus non-reactive donors.

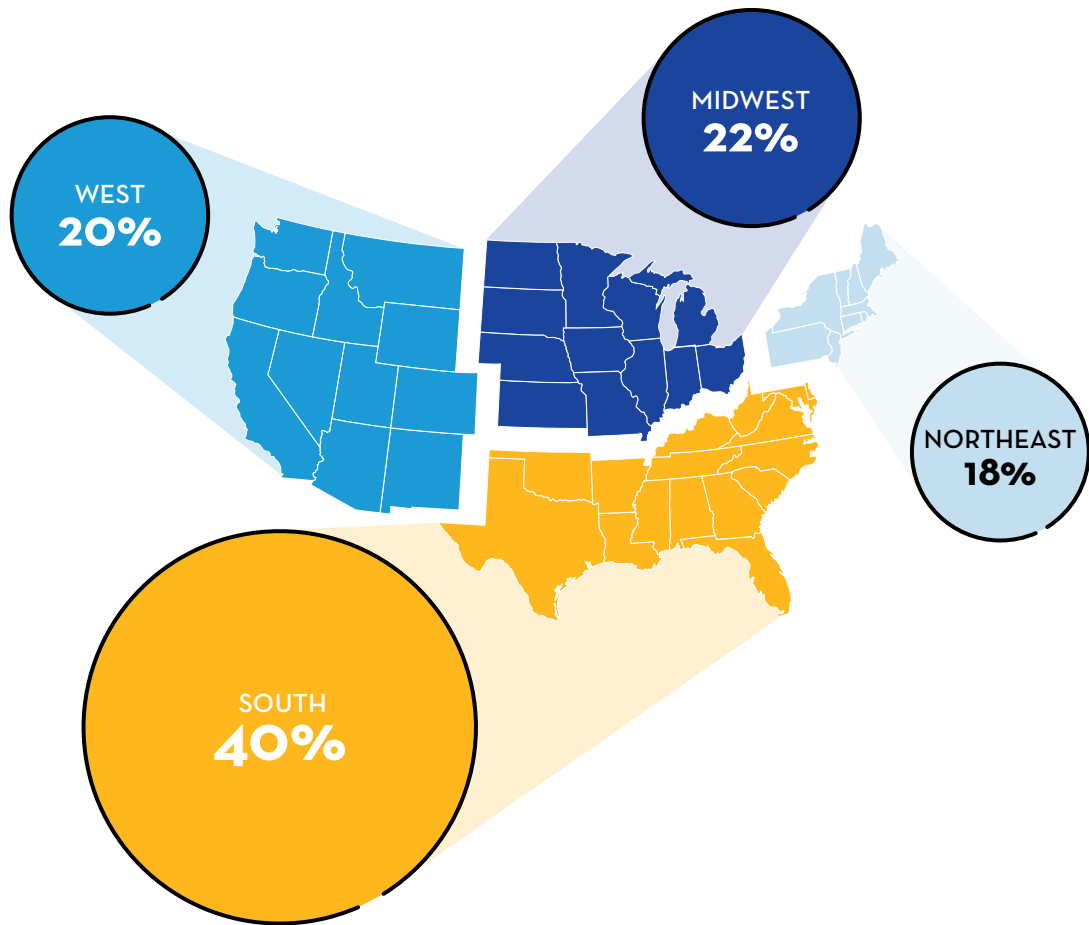
**Chart 6:** Percent of African-American donors by type of giving



### Where do these reactive givers come from?

Reactive givers represent all areas of the country, but the area with the highest percentage of reactive donors is the South with 40 percent of reactive givers coming from the swath of land that extends from Florida to Texas and as far north as Maryland. The Midwest comes in second with 22 percent, the West in third at 20 percent, and the Northeast with 18 percent. Chart 7 shows what regions have the highest percentage of reactive givers.

**Chart 7:** Reactive giving by region




### What are reactive givers supporting - the organization or the broader cause?

Oftentimes, the fine line between receiving a donation and not receiving a donation from a donor comes down to the simple act of asking. However, reactive givers were as much or more likely to make a decision to support a particular cause by actively seeking out an organization as they were to respond to an ask.

Overall, 47 percent of reactive givers made the decision about the cause first and the organization second, while only 22 percent responded to a direct request from a nonprofit. This varies across the generations, with younger donors much more likely to have attached themselves to the cause over the organization. For many, these donations were not just about heartstrings being pulled, but about “standing up” for beliefs. Chart 8 looks at giving by decision and generation.

**Chart 8:** Decision for giving by generation



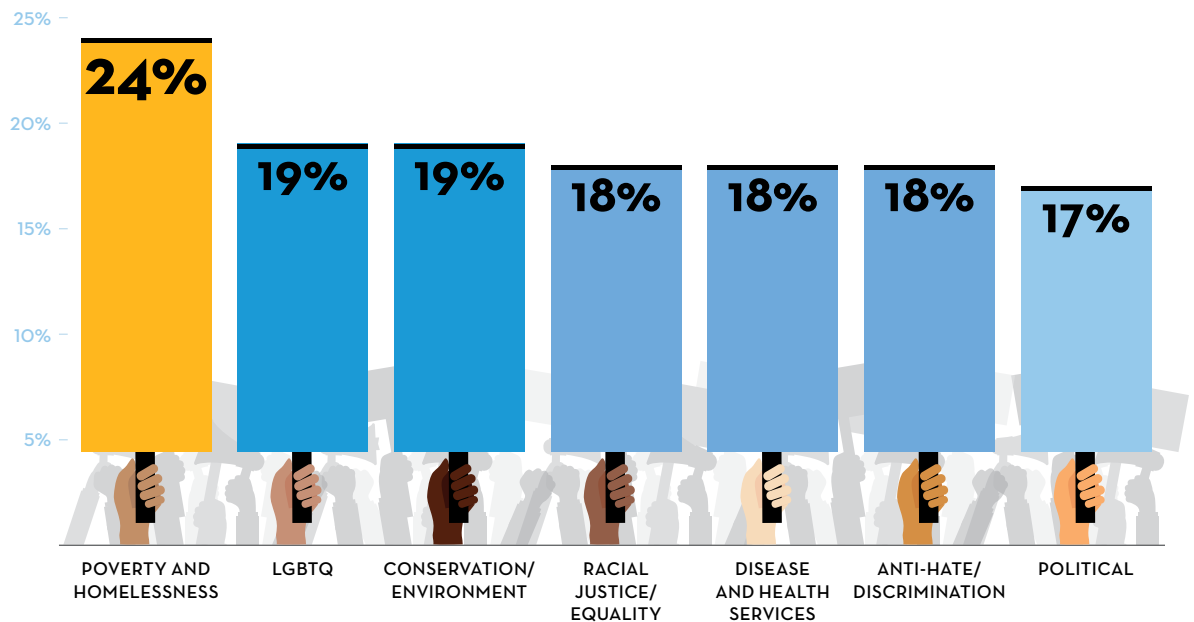
	Total Reactive Givers	Gen Z/Y	Gen X	Boomers and Matures
I decided to make a rage donation on my own and sought out the organization(s)	47%	53%	55%	32%
I responded to direct request from the organization or a spokesperson	22%	23%	19%	22%
Mix of both	25%	17%	25%	39%
Not sure	6%	7%	2%	7%

### Who are the main beneficiaries of reactive giving?

Not surprisingly given the political affiliations of 2017’s reactive givers, progressive organizations and non-partisan organizations benefitted the most from reactive giving. In total, 62 percent of reactive givers gave to liberal causes and 37 percent gave to conservative causes. That said, 66 percent of all reactive givers also gave to non-partisan causes like poverty and homelessness. The main causes that drive reactive giving include poverty (24 percent), LGBTQ issues (19 percent), environmental conservation (19 percent), and racial justice (18 percent).

Chart 9 looks at the main causes that drove reactive giving.

**Chart 9:** Reactive giving by topics and themes








### Will Reactive Giving Continue?

Eighty-six percent of reactive givers say they plan to continue giving as much or more to charities than in the past.

We asked reactive givers when they last made a donation because of increased urgency or political events they saw as threatening their causes or beliefs. About half of reactive giving was made by September of 2017, but more than a third came in the last quarter of the year from October to December – suggesting that feelings continued to periodically surge and translate into donations.

Interestingly, if we look across the generations (chart 10), we see Gen X started 2017 with a strong reactive giving cohort that waned a bit, while older and younger generations were a bit more consistent throughout the year.

**Chart 10:**  
Generational reactive giving over a 12-month period

				
	Total Reactive Givers	Gen Z/Y	Gen X	Boomers and Matures
Within the last month	15%	18%	11%	13%
More than a month ago but within the last 3 months	21%	23%	16%	22%
3 to 6 months ago	15%	15%	16%	15%
More than 6 months ago	21%	18%	30%	18%
Not sure	28%	26%	28%	32%

However, nonprofit organizations cannot simply rest on their laurels and count on external “outrages” to drive donations. Proof is needed and required to show these gifts are making a difference. Only 23 percent of reactive donors describe the impact of their donations as “very effective,” while 61 percent suspect they are just “somewhat effective” in helping organizations achieve their goals.



## Conclusion

Reactive giving is real and continues in 2018. Most recently, we've seen reactivity come to life in the March For Our Lives events across the country, where young people showed the power of their collective voice, as well as ability to fundraise and organize. It's impossible to predict why, when, or how; but there is no question that moments like this will continue to light a flame and spark individuals to action.

While reactive giving represents an opportunity for nonprofits to engage first-time younger donors, it's essential to understand why donors give reactively. This study shows that oftentimes the "cause" is more important than the "organization." Nonprofits will need to prove their value to these donors to build loyalty over time, and keep them involved beyond that first gift.

Here are some suggested actions to help nonprofit organizations get the most out of the data in this report:

**Reactive giving is an entryway** for new and first-time donors to engage with an organization. It represented a significant growth spurt for many nonprofits. However, it's essential not to lose the momentum of the donors' initial reason for donating. Quickly nurturing a relationship with these donors will be essential.

**While reactive giving is real**, it won't be a sustainable strategy unless organizations are clear about how donors' dollars are advancing the cause. We've seen this in multiple reports. Donors, especially younger donors, are not simply content to give dollars - they want to know how and where their dollars are being spent, and they want to know what impact their dollars are having. Create communications that share the successes and accomplishments of your organization - especially for these new donors.

**In being "donor centric,"** organizations need to be strategic about channel preferences and targeted messaging. These data suggest that organizations should also be attentive to the emotional triggers and real-life trajectory of donors.

**Going forward**, the most successful organizations will offer the right combination of urgency with hope and progress to keep these donors invested and feel as if their efforts make a difference.

**With so many of these donations made to the cause not the organization**, nonprofits need to be more deliberate about what their brand stands for, clear about their mission, and build a connection that doesn't assume familiarity, but works to earn donors' trust.

## Methodology

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We conducted an online survey of 895 U.S. donors. A non-probability sample of adults aged 18+ was drawn from a national survey panel of over two million households. The deployed and incoming sample was controlled to be U.S. Census representative, and qualifying participants reported that they had made a monetary donation to at least one nonprofit organization/charitable cause within the last 12 months (excluding trade union, children's school, alma mater, and place of worship). Data were collected December 5-30, 2017.



## About Edge Research

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Edge Research is a premier marketing research firm servicing nonprofits, associations, and corporations. Over the past 20 years Edge has helped dozens of nonprofits move to a donor-centric mindset. Research insights guide clients on how to communicate with their audiences more effectively, retain and grow their donor base, and make the changes needed to cultivate the next generation of supporters.

“Team Reactive” consists of Lisa Dropkin, Karen Emmerson, Pam Loeb and Sarah Rodgers. We are indebted to our colleagues at Edge who supported this work - drafting questions, testing programming, overseeing data collection and running tables! A sincere thank you to Andy Prince for helping us pull it altogether and to Jackie Huck for making it look so good.

