

Summary Report

The American University Black Swing Voter Study

Sam Fulwood III, Leonard Steinhorn and David C. Barker

Born between 1990 and 2002, young Black Americans came of age nearly two generations removed from the Civil Rights era and well past the subsequent age of affirmative action. They live in a nation that is barely recognizable to their grandparents or, in some cases, even their own parents. After all, Barack Obama—an African American with a Kenyan name—is the first president most of them can really remember, and a record number of Black men and women have held elected office during their lifetimes, from City Halls to statehouses to the US Congress.

However, as this generation of African Americans mature politically, they doubt whether the symbolism of racial progress is capable of keeping pace with their real-life experiences and expectations. Pointing to resurgent waves of racism and police violence, expanding economic inequality, widening health disparities, life-delaying student loan debt, and—perhaps most importantly—inaction by elected officials, young Black Americans fear that the U.S. political process and democratic institutions fail to hear their voices and offer them little to no tangible solutions to address issues of paramount importance to them.

In response, despite the enormous political gains that Black Americans have made over the last five decades, those between the ages of 18-29 flirt with withdrawing their participation in the nation's established political processes and institutions. However, they have not yet given up on the entire system. They maintain a certain degree of optimism about the future.

In this Summary Report of the American University Black Swing Voter Study, we offer insights into this disillusionment among Black youth. Based on the results of our unique “battleground survey” of Black Americans and six 90-minute focus groups, we find that young Black Americans are a richly complex community that is rationally responding to their hopes, to their youthful sense that life might get better, but with a keen awareness of the limitations that the political establishment imposes upon them.¹ Their apparent withdrawal from voting and lack of trust in government is an expression of frustration and an honest reaction to a sense that the political deck is stacked against them and that those in charge really don't care about them.

¹ The African American Research Collaborative conducted the survey from July 1-9, 2020. They interviewed 1,215 Black Americans in six battleground states (Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida). It included an oversample of the youngest age cohort (18-29) which comprised almost half (49%) of the sample. The other age cohorts were smaller—20% for 30-44 (n=237), 18% for 45-59 (n=219), and 13% for 60+ (n=158)—but the overall results are weighted to US Census by age, gender, education, and the populations of each state. The margin of error for the full sample is less than or equal to plus/minus 3 percentage-points, but they are larger for analyses of sub-samples based on age, gender, etcetera.

Our observations fall neatly in line with a general, national sense of political frustration experienced by Americans of all races and ethnicities, especially among youth. A recent Tufts University study found that young people are particularly disillusioned with organized political parties: nearly as many young people (33%) identify as political Independents as identify as Democrats (35%), which is far greater than the percentage who identify as Republicans (21%).

Like the Tufts researchers, who observed that “young people’s somewhat tepid embrace of political parties does not stem from a lack of understanding about their functions and their positions,” but rather “... *doubts that the parties represent their views and interests and skepticism about their efficacy.*” [Italics added], the young people we interviewed tend to be engaged in their communities, informed about politics, and interested in non-traditional forms of civic engagement, but they are tired of being ignored or taken for granted.

In the remainder of this report, we document our specific findings—both concerning and hopeful—as they relate to young Black Americans’ views toward voting and the system more generally.

Young Black Americans are “Swing Voters”

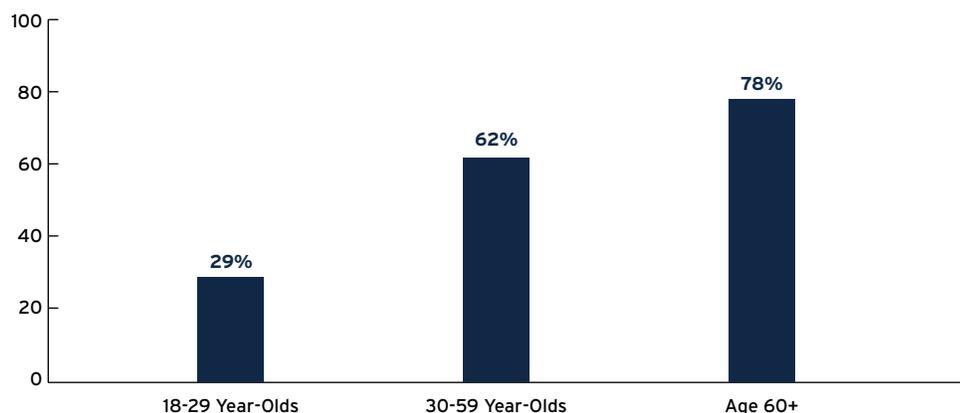
As we outlined previously, young Black Americans represent a critical—but grossly ignored—segment of the electorate, prompting us to describe them as “swing voters,” oscillating between voting for candidates whom they see as speaking directly to them and not voting at all.²

In our survey, 49% of those under 30 years of age say it doesn’t make any difference anyway if they vote or not, compared to 29% of those between the ages of 30 and 59 and only 7% of those over 60 years of age. Not surprisingly, then, only 37% of those under 30 say they voted in the last congressional elections, compared to 61% of 30-59 year-olds and 76% of those over 60. And as Figure 1 illustrates on the following page, only 29% of those under 30 intend to “definitely vote” in the upcoming elections, compared to 62% of 30-59 year-olds and 78% of those over 60. Importantly, these relatively paltry percentages among young Black Americans are probably overstated, given the well-known tendency of survey respondents to wildly overestimate their likelihood of voting.

² See “American University Survey: Young Black Americans Are Key 2020 Swing Voters: Fewer Than Half Say They Will Vote for Biden, While Many May Not Vote at All,” AU Media Communications, July 30, 2020.

Our polling and concurrent series of focus groups makes one overriding fact crystal clear: with relatively few exceptions and compared to their elders, young Black people exhibit a greater lack of faith in the nation’s institutions, political parties and elected officials to do right by them. Indeed, they expressed grave resentment that issues they’re concerned about remain outside the periphery of national attention.

Fig. 1 Percentage of Respondents Who Intend to “Definitely Vote” in the Upcoming Elections



Young Black Voters Do Not Trust the Political Establishment

Fewer than half (47%) of young Black respondents said they felt welcome in the Democratic party, and fewer than a third (28%) said they felt welcomed by Republicans. Similarly, fewer than half (43%) said they trusted Congressional Democrats “to do what is best for the Black community” and slightly more than a quarter of them (29%) trust Republicans to do so.

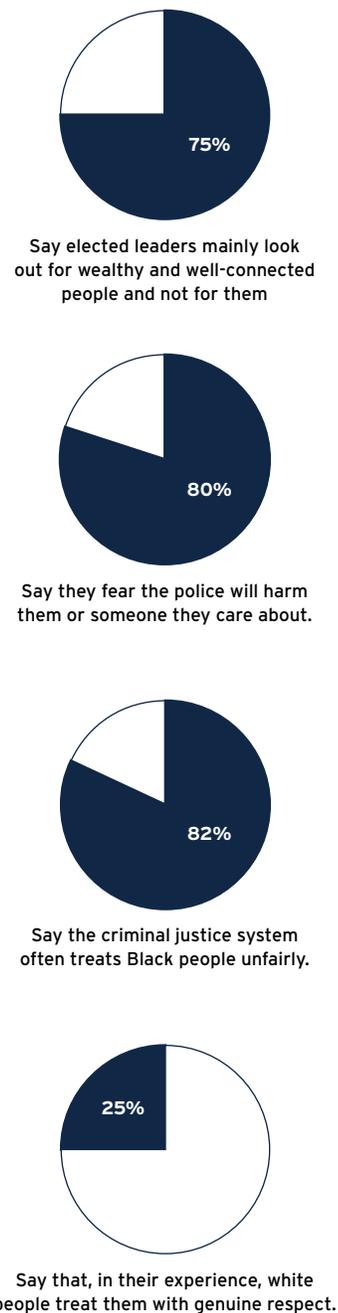
Typical of the frustration, a young woman in suburban Atlanta told us she didn’t believe much that any elected officials say because she didn’t see any results that helped her life. “Big talkers,” she labeled them. “They get to their elected positions by, you know, talking a good game and not necessarily delivering. I can’t speak for everyone [in the focus group session], but at least, you know, from what I see personally, that’s all they do.”

Another 20-something woman from Pennsylvania shared a similar view. “I don’t trust anything [elected officials] say,” she said, noting that she relies on Twitter for reliable information. “But as far as like officials and things like that, I don’t know that I really trust them because nobody’s on the same page. Everybody’s on an individual mindset and nobody is working to do anything positive for my community. So, I feel like that’s what’s hurting us, right?”

Moreover, we found additional warning signals of young people’s alienation from the system. (Fig. 2).

In sum, our polling and concurrent series of focus groups makes one fact crystal clear: with relatively few exceptions and compared to their elders, young Black people exhibit less faith in the nation’s institutions, political parties and elected officials to do right by them. Indeed, they expressed grave resentment that issues they’re concerned about remain outside the periphery of national attention.

Fig. 2 Warning Signals of Young People’s Alienation from the System



Young Black Americans are Not Loyal Democratic Foot-Soldiers

Policy prescriptions targeted to attract Black youth are decidedly progressive and more likely to be embraced by Democrats. And to be sure, modern history demonstrates that progressive Democrats are more likely than conservative Republicans to reach out to young Black Americans and, therefore, the more probable policymakers to garner their attention—and votes

However, young Black Americans say they are fed up with being taken for granted by the Democratic Party and will not fall in knee-jerk

compliance with the political status quo. Young Black Americans tend to view Democrats much less favorably—and Republicans more favorably—than do their parents and grandparents. Specifically, they were much less likely than their older peers to view Democrats as “welcoming” or to trust Democrats in Congress to act better on their behalf. Among middle-aged (30-59) Black Americans, 64% said they felt welcomed among Democrats and 76% of the older (60+) Black Americans said the same thing. In both cases older respondents were significantly higher in their support for Democrats than the 47% of younger Black respondents.

What our findings suggest is that they are a richly complex community that is rationally responding to their hopes, to their youthful sense that life might get better, but with a keen awareness of the limitations that the political establishment imposes upon them. Their apparent withdrawal from voting and lack of trust in government is an expression of frustration and an honest reaction to a sense that the political deck is stacked against them and that those in charge really don't care about reshuffling and dealing fairly with them.

Still more curiously, the 29% of younger Black respondents who expressed trust in Congressional Republicans to act in their best interest was slightly higher than middle-age Black respondents (21%) and significantly higher than older Black respondents (8%).

To quote one of our focus group participants, a young man from Detroit: “My personal belief is that maybe if more of us [Black voters] steer toward, you know, just the center and made

both parties fight harder, something might get done on our behalf,” he said. “I’m looking at other options. Firstly, I’m going to change my party affiliation to Independent. That’s just something I feel I can, you know, just to make one particular party over another fight harder for my vote.”

Moreover, despite widespread disapproval of President Trump overall, young Black Americans appear more charitable in their view of the president than are older

Fig. 3 Percentage of Respondents Who Express Trust in Congressional Democrats to Act in their Best Interest

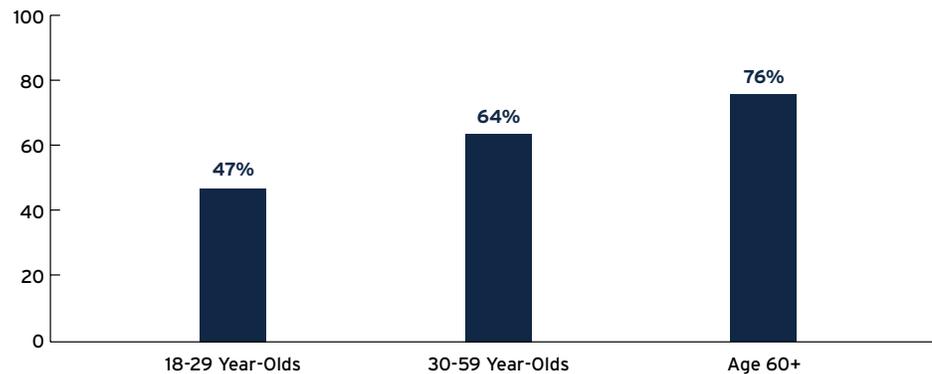
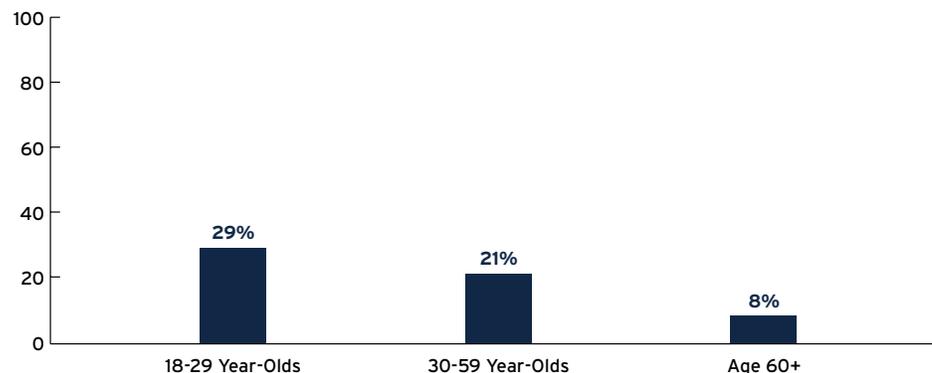


Fig. 4 Percentage of Respondents Who Express Trust in Congressional Republicans to Act in their Best Interest



Black Americans (see Figures 5-7). For example, 79% of young Black Americans say Trump is a racist, 74% said he is “incompetent,” and 73% “disagree with most of his policies.” By comparison, 90% of those 60 and over say Trump is a racist, 90% say he’s incompetent and 87% disagree with most of his policies.

For young Black Americans, the President poses a curious paradox. While what they perceive to be his overt racism makes him an especially odious political figure, many of the populist grievances that are central to his pitch to working-class White Americans—such as how the establishment silences their voices and how the system is “rigged” against them—also reflect the longstanding frustrations of the Black community. Underscoring this point of view, more than a third (35%) of the young respondents said they admired President Trump for “the way he shows strength and defies the establishment,” despite the fact that 74% say Trump “is incompetent.”

As one focus group participant in his late 20s from Michigan put it: “I don’t like anything about Trump because I think he’s a racist and I would never vote for him. But I do like the fact that he stands up for his people and I wish our Black leaders would do for us what [Trump] does for them.”

Indeed, there’s a bright thread of rational thought embedded in their attitudes. Young Black people want a champion for their ideals and causes, as evidenced in the 78% of the young Black respondents who say a motivating factor in whether they vote is “to support the Black community.”

Fig. 5 Percentage of Respondents Who Believe President Trump is Racist

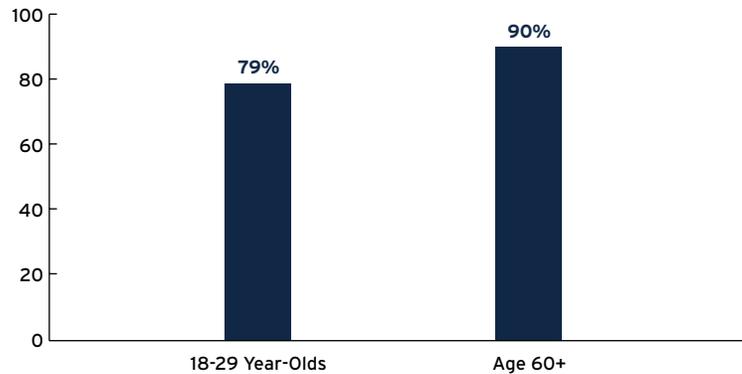


Fig. 6 Percentage of Respondents Who Believe President Trump is Incompetent

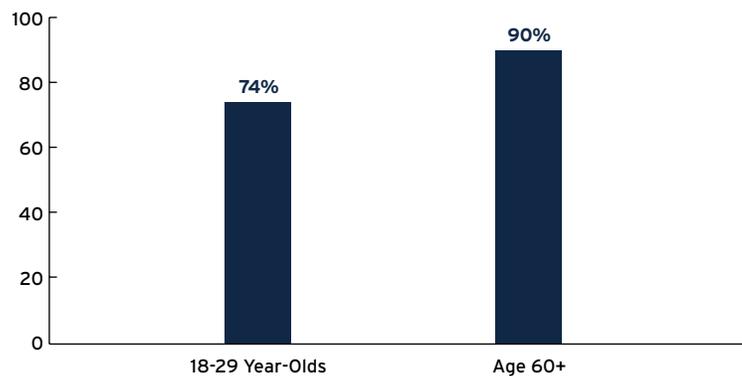
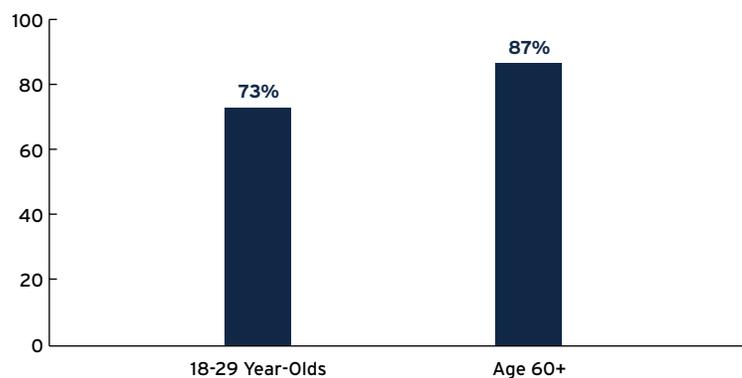


Fig. 7 Percentage of Respondents Who Disagree with Most of President Trump’s Policies



Perspective

Marcus Johnson

According to our survey of Black Americans in electoral “battleground” states, young Black Americans appear to view the world through a different cultural and political lens than that of their elders. I believe that this is due to the differences in life experiences of each generation. Older Black Americans went from segregation and two unequal systems to a single integrated system in many facets of their daily lives. What is more, older Black Americans grew up closer in proximity to the Civil Rights movement and lived through a period where political activity delivered concrete gains in the form of voting rights and increased representation by Black elected officials. The Civil Rights movement was heavily influenced by the Black Church, which may account for why older Black Americans tend to have more trust in the Democratic party establishment to act in their best interests.

Many young Black Americans have a markedly different political perspective. As a young Black American myself, I know that many of my peers have neither witnessed, nor experienced the kind of seismic political change that their elders have. While most young Black Americans have a favorable view of former President Barack Obama, a sizable percentage of this demographic is too young to remember what America was like before that. Thus, that event did not trigger the same kind of boost in pride and loyalty toward the Democratic party as it did for their parents and grandparents, and it may have led to greater expectations.

Those expectations have certainly not been met. Young Black Americans have faced difficult economic times in the decade after the 2008 economic collapse, with higher levels of student loan default and little progress at breaking into

higher paying jobs. These young Black Americans have seen rising housing inequalities over the past few decades force their families to move from increasingly expensive urban areas in New York and California. As a result, young Black Americans seem to feel disillusioned with a system where they have not seen the kind of positive change that their elders have.

All of this may help to explain why, according to this online survey (which is just one survey and should not be taken as definitive), young Black Americans appear to be less religious, less aligned with Democrats, more individualistic, and less consistently liberal, ideologically, than are older Black Americans. Specifically, compared to those over 30 years of age, those under 30 are:

- About 23 percentage points more likely to say that government assistance programs enable the personal failings of those who have not worked hard, rather than providing needed assistance to those who have fallen on hard times (66% to 89%)
- About 11 percentage points less likely to express trust toward religious institutions (47% to 58%), and about 14 percentage points less likely to say that religious leaders are effective change agents (45% to 59%).
- About 19 percentage points less likely to indicate strongly that they vote out of fear of what the other party might do (53% to 34%)
- About 11 percentage-points less likely to indicate strongly that they vote in order to support the Black community 55% to 66%.

- About 19 percentage-points less likely to identify as a Democrat (59% to 78%), and almost twice as likely to identify as a Republican (7.5% to 15%)
- About 18 percentage-points more likely than those 30 or older to say they watch Fox News, at least “sometimes” (63% to 45%)

All of these differences are “statistically significant” at the 99% level of confidence, which means that there is less than a one percent change that the differences we observed are attributable to chance. Even more striking are the differences in perspectives between those under 30 and their grandparents’ generation, those over 60. Because the latter group comprised a significantly smaller portion of the sample (n=162), we are on safer ground comparing the 18-29 group with everyone older. But when comparing the youngest and oldest Black Americans we studied, the differences we observe are substantially starker.

Of course, it is important to remember that these findings are relative. On the whole, young Black Americans are certainly not conservative; they express liberal views and support for liberal causes, and they identify strongly with the Black Lives Matter movement. And of course, results from any one survey should be interpreted cautiously. African Americans living in these six battleground states might not be representative of African Americans nationwide, and online survey respondents are known to be a little more sophisticated in some ways than is the general population.

That said, these numbers demonstrate that Black Americans are not a monolith. Just like every other demographic group in the country, there are important generational differences that may have significant political impacts, both short-and-long term. Indeed, if validated by other surveys, these findings signal major changes that may be on their way: in another ten years, when those now under 30 comprise a larger share of the electorate, if there is a Republican Party that seems more open to diversity, it may be able to attract a larger share of Black voters than it has at any time since before the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. And if the Democratic Party does not heed the yearnings and concerns of this younger generation, it may soon have a hard time winning national elections. ■

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Marcus Johnson
PhD Candidate, Political Science,
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Young Black Americans Have Not Given Up

So far, a reader might be inclined to conclude that there is pervasive hopelessness and resignation among a significant population of young Black Americans. We reject such an interpretation. Rather, our study opens the door to welcoming an important segment of the nation into the political establishment. To be sure, young Black Americans are not necessarily a lost generation. Far from it. Fifty percent of them said they were “optimistic” about their “economic future and/or that of [their] family, slightly more positive to the responses of respondents aged 30-44 (41%) and equal to respondents 45-59 and 60+ (both at 50%).

Furthermore, when asked how best to change things in the nation, young Black people ranked “joining a street protest” highly and scored Black Lives Matter as the “most effective” group working to ensure that the changes on issues such as police misconduct are taking place. BLM ranked higher than any other group including elected officials, street protesters, educators, business leaders, clergy and journalists. Such a finding suggests that young Black Americans hold out faith that the changes they seek are possible, as does their support for building businesses and volunteering in community-based activities.

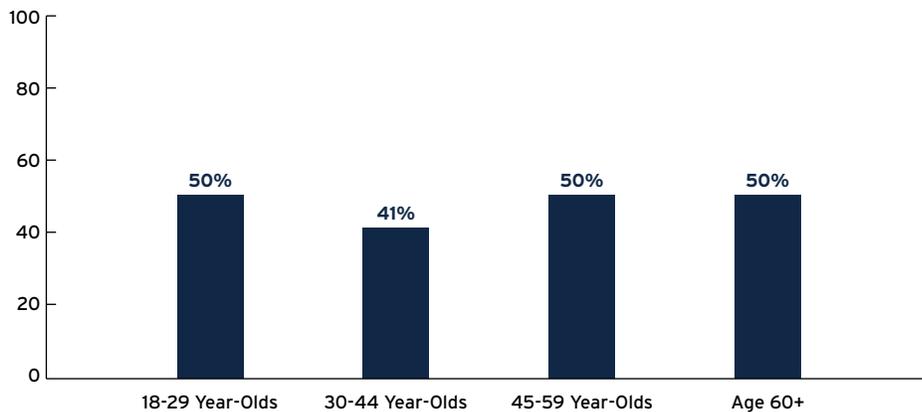
To gauge the potential for civic inspiration, we posed an open-ended question to many of the young participants: “Is there a historical figure who inspires them?” and “who’s doing right by the community today?” Judging by the responses of “Malcolm X” and “Fannie Lou Hamer” as the historical figure and, repeatedly, “LeBron James” and “Beyoncé” as the contemporary figures, young Black Americans were clear-eyed in their preference for advocates who are forthright and aggressive in using their stature to call attention and demand reforms that directly impact Black communities.

Indeed, their optimism for the future of the country extends to their belief that federal programs to provide healthcare, guaranteed jobs, tuition assistance, childcare supports, increased minimum wages and, most intriguingly, race-based reparations will be enacted in the next ten years.

And, for all of their dissatisfaction with politics and politicians, 78% of young Black Americans said “the outcomes of elections have a meaningful impact on my life.” Clearly, they understand that political actors and the government has real-world consequences on them.

To put it another way, it’s quite possible for political leaders to bring an emerging generation of Black Americans into full citizen participation. Writing recently in

Fig. 8 Percentage of Respondents Who Report Feeling “Optimistic” about Their “Economic Future and/or That of [Their] Family



The New York Times, Alicia Garza, a founder of the Black Lives Matter Global Network and leader of the [Black Futures Lab](#), a community organizing and voter outreach group, made the case for an agenda that would activate Black youth voters.

“We want the things that everybody deserves,” Garza [wrote](#), citing her organization’s 2019 poll of more than 31,000 Black people from all 50 states. “Ninety percent of respondents, for example, say that it is a major problem that their wages are too low to support a family, and that figure jumps to 97 percent among those who are electorally engaged.” Garza noted the most important issues for Black respondents were the same concerns that worry many other Americans—“low wages, lack of quality health care, substandard housing, rising college costs and

different sets of rules for the wealthy and the poor.”

Similarly, Marcus Johnson, an American University political science doctoral student who assisted in some of the focus groups, [noted](#) concerned political leaders can “pass legislation that can directly impact the lives of young Black people and change how they feel about the [Democratic] party over the long term.” He cited police reform that increases federal oversight over local police departments, creating stronger incentives for government contractors to employ Black workers, offering monthly stimulus payments for people economically disadvantaged because of the COVID-19 crisis, and approving statehood for the District of Columbia to increase Black representation in Congress and improve the relative lack of trust in democratic principles.

Perspective

La’Nasa Clarkson

In the time overlapping work on this study, our nation upended itself. A global pandemic swept across the country, shuttering businesses, workplaces, and more than 200,000 Americans have died as a result. Street demonstrations raged in big cities and small towns, sending crowds into the streets, objecting to the senseless police violence on Black women, men, and children. And, on top of it all, we struggled to maneuver through the promises and rhetoric of an election year.

For many like me—young, Black, and female in America—the institutions and politics of the moment offer limited solace to the onslaught of daily horrors and political unresponsiveness. In reflecting on the voices uncovered during this research, I heard and understood why so many young Black people feel untrusting, exhausted, and overwhelmed by the seeming indifference of the political establishment to our concerns.

When I asked Black women questions regarding their level of trust in America’s democracy and voting, many confirmed that they had no confidence that their vote would matter. Many expressed how difficult it was for them to trust a system they believed was built to keep Black people oppressed. Therefore, little wonder why many of these Black women told me they questioned the validity of this “democracy” while also wondering if reform to these institutions is even possible.

Black women have served as leaders of many movements, and despite their distrust in a system, they continue to battle through in hopes of fairness and change. To me, this alone speaks to the unwavering spirit of the Black woman.

Although these reservations exist, participants did confirm that they all see the importance of voting, whether it be a personal form of activism or to show appreciation for those that made this right possible. One of the participants expressed that she had no interest in voting, but she planned on voting because she did not want to upset her grandmother.

Despite the willingness to participate in the upcoming election, members of the focus groups expressed concerns about how the election will be conducted during a national pandemic. A young woman from a middle-class background said she was worried about voter disenfranchisement when it came to the November election. She believed that local election commissioners were not realistic when it came to what was necessary to conduct an election during a pandemic safely.

Within the primary election, there were instances of voter disenfranchisement where voters were forced to stand in outrageous lines for long periods to cast their votes. Many voters turned away from these conditions and were unable to participate in the primary voting period. Will we see these same issues occur in November? How can voters be ensured of the effectiveness of the voting process?

In this study, Black women voters believe that deep systemic, cultural and political change is necessary to restore their trust in our democracy and political institutions—and to ensure a better, more equal and inclusive society that embraces and respects all its members. That’s what they believe our country needs and they are determined to advance us toward that goal. But they worry our nation will continue to fall short and find excuses as to why it hasn’t happened. ■



La’Nasa Clarkson
AU Sine Institute of Policy & Politics

Conclusion

For Black Americans, the nation's history of anti-Black racism has long generated feelings of political ambivalence toward participation in the nation's civic life.

Political scientists Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza identified these feelings as “one of the defining features of African-American political thought.” Other observers, such as Pennsylvania State political scientist Ray Block, who served as consultant to our study, observe the deep and mixed bag of emotions Black Americans swing between in their feeling toward participating in the nation's civic life.

“Scholars commonly describe the history of Black leadership as ‘pendulating’ between periods of integrationism and nationalism,” Block wrote. “Because of their unique experiences, Blacks are particularly attuned to the nation's contradictory legacies, and their attitudes about America reveal both affection and disaffection.” Our study strongly implies such a reality exists among today's young Black Americans and demands immediate political attention. Or, as Block told us, “Our fractured race relations stands in the way of our democracy.”

To be sure, the prevalence of young Black Americans' disengagement in political life, and

the failure of political leaders to address that disengagement, poses a direct challenge to the ideals of our nation. As Michael J. Wood puts it, in his “philosophical and practical” arguments for the imperative of eliminating political alienation:

If American citizens do not feel that their elected leaders are effectively representing their beliefs, or that they themselves have no way to affect public policy, then the principles on which this nation was founded are not being upheld. Political alienation, then, measures the extent to which the United States stays true to its foundational democratic principles.

Political alienation becomes an even bigger concern when it is unequally distributed throughout the citizenry. If certain categories of people do not engage with their political leaders as much as others, the needs of those people will likely go unaddressed. This leads to a situation in which the political establishment

only concerns itself with the problems of a select group of people rather than the citizenry as a whole. The final report of the American Political Science Association's Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy argued that this is indeed the case today.

Today [...], the voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally. The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent. Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow (Jacobs et. al. 2004:1).

Of course, this study falls well short of the complete and definitive articulation of specifics or motivations of young Black Americans' disillusionment with the political establishment.³ More work is needed by a wider array of researchers to make clearer the attitudes of young Black people. However, our survey and focus groups make a couple of things very apparent: young Black Americans want to engage and be a productive part of American society, but many of them worry that the system has turned away

from them. In response, they see no logic in playing the system's game.

The choices that these Americans make—to either engage or walk away—can determine election outcomes. More importantly, though, if left unaddressed, the concerns of young Black Americans may pose a deep challenge to the nation's stability and its democratic institutions. Our results suggest that there is some hope—the disillusionment that young African Americans feel can improve—but it would require significant changes on the part of elected leaders in both parties. ■

³ Furthermore, we recognize a series of contextual limitations that surely colors the findings in our study. For example, the polling and focus groups were conducted during the first two weeks of July, 2020, in the midst of a domestic shutdown of business and social activities due to a global pandemic, widespread national and international demonstrations and street protests against a White police officer's killing of George Floyd and other brutal acts of widely reported police abuses against Black Americans, and, of course, the constant media attention paid to a racially charged presidential campaign. These events set the stage for public and private conversations involving racial issues and, no doubt, factor heavily into our respondents' mindset as they spoke with us.



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DAVID C. BARKER is Professor of Government and Director of the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University. He is a widely recognized expert on elections and public opinion, and has written extensively on those topics. Prior to coming to American University, he directed the Institute for Social Research at California State University in Sacramento, where he founded the CALSPEAKS Opinion Research Program and the Public Health Survey Research Program—the latter of collects data for the US Centers for Disease Control. He has also held visiting appointments at Science Po, Glasgow University, and University of Sydney.

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