



White Paper

The Racial/Ethnic Confidence Gap in the Accuracy of Elections

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Voting, voting rights, and access to the ballot have been key flashpoints in American political history. Scholarly research abounds in how political parties, regional interest groups, and political candidates have used racial and ethnic divisions to increase turnout in some elections and suppress various groups' participation in other elections.

A touchstone of democracy has been that once the election is over, all groups have accepted the election results as being fairly and accurately counted. According to most media accounts and "conventional wisdom," the US Presidential Election in 2000, which turned on a decision by the US Supreme Court, sorely tested that assumption.

However, relatively little detailed research and analysis exists on the degree to which major racial/ethnic groups in the United States are confident that the results of elections in which they participate are accurately counted. The answer to this question has importance in dealing with the issue of low voter turnout in US elections. If voters across the board do not have confidence that their votes are counted accurately, the impetus to vote might well be lessened. If voters in a specific racial/ethnic group do not have confidence that their votes are counted accurately, a weakened incentive to vote in that group might lead to an underrepresentation of that group's voice in the election.

In an effort to establish at least a baseline descriptive answer to the question, "Do members of major racial or ethnic groups in the United States have differing levels of confidence that their votes are counted accurately?" InfoSENTRY has asked the following question each January since 2004 in an Opinion Research Corporation (ORC) CARAVAN®¹ nationwide opinion poll.

"Now I have a question about elections in your local area. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you are not at all confident and 5 means you are very confident, how confident are you that votes for federal, state, and local offices and ballot issues are counted accurately in the elections in your area?"

In order to obtain an overall "positive" assessment of the confidence in election count accuracy, we added the "4" (confident) and "5" (very confident) responses. We derived the overall "negative" assessment by summing the "2" (not very confident) and "1" (not at all confident) responses.²

¹ CARAVAN® is a registered trademark of Opinion Research Corporation. An endnote to this White Paper provides additional information on the sampling and statistical methodology involved in ORC's CARAVAN® national telephone surveys.

² The "3" response on the 1 through 5 scale, commonly called the Likert scale, is an affective neutral score, indicating neither positive nor negative feeling toward the object of the measurement. We did not include these neutral responses in our tabulations. Similarly, we did not include the "don't know" responses in our calculations.

The next calculation step was to derive a “net confidence score,” also called “the spread,” by subtracting the negative scores from the positive scores. This type of calculation is a common step in public opinion and marketing research.

Table 1 contains the numerical results of the net confidence scores in InfoSENTRY’s January surveys from 2004 through 2011. Figure 1 contains a graphical representation of the same trend data for the three major racial/ethnic groups during that time period.

A first observation that leaps from the data is the decline in confidence in vote tabulation accuracy among all three major racial/ethnic groups from 2004 to 2011. In 2004, the net confidence score for Whites was 53. That number rose to 58 in 2007, but

promptly reversed course substantially, ending at 48 in 2011.

Among Blacks the net confidence score was only 9 in 2004. However, by 2011, this group’s net confidence score had dropped to -4, the only net negative confidence score in Table 1.

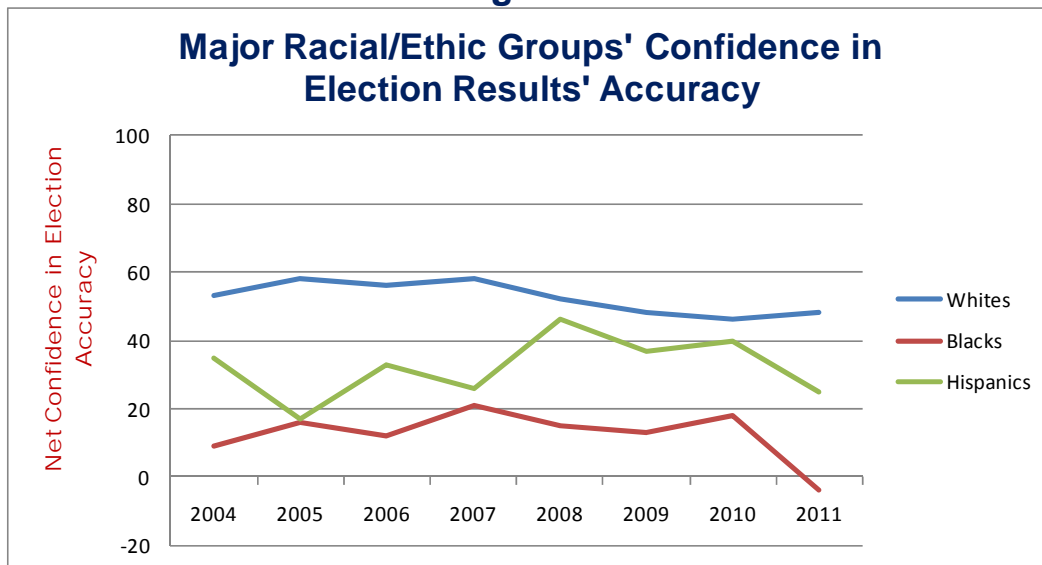
The net confidence score in election tabulation accuracy also fell for Hispanics over the eight annual, national surveys. The score began at 35 in 2004 and ended at 25 in 2011.

The declines are statistically significant over the eight-survey period.

Table 1
Major Racial/Ethnic Groups’ Confidence in Election Results’ Accuracy

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Whites	53	58	56	58	52	48	46	48
Blacks	9	16	12	21	15	13	18	-4
Hispanics	35	17	33	26	46	37	40	25

Figure 1



A second observation is that White respondents have maintained a significantly higher level of net confidence in elections tabulation accuracy than have Black and Hispanic respondents. In general, Whites have maintained a net confidence level in vote tabulation accuracy that has been twice as high—or greater—than has been Blacks' net confidence level in vote tabulation accuracy. In the 2011 survey, the 52-point spread between Whites' and Blacks' net confidence scores in election tabulation accuracy was the greatest spread of any observed among racial/ethnic groups during the eight national opinion surveys.

While not producing as wide a gap as between that of Whites and Blacks on the issue, Whites' net confidence levels in vote tabulation accuracy have been higher than Hispanics' net confidence levels in every survey since the beginning of our research effort in 2004. The gap in net election tabulation accuracy confidence scores between Whites and Hispanics was at its greatest in 2005 when it reached 41 points. It was at its low point in both 2008 and 2010 when the gap was only 6 points.

The major contributing factor in the wide variations in the gap between White and Hispanic net election tabulation confidence scores arose largely from fluctuations in the Hispanics' confidence scores. Net confidence scores among Whites, while declining over the eight national surveys, generally were more stable across the surveys than were the net confidence scores for Hispanics.³

³ The trend lines in Figure 1 show the relative smoothness of the net confidence levels for both Whites and Blacks from the 2004 through the 2010 surveys. Hispanics' net confidence scores varied widely during that period. We do not rule out the possibility that some of the variation in the Hispanics' net confidence in election results' accuracy scores comes from the relatively small sample size for this racial/ethnic group.

A third observation is that there were major, statistically significant drops in net confidence in vote counting results among Black and Hispanic respondents from the observation period in January 2010 to the observation period in January 2011. While the net confidence scores for the White racial/ethnic group remained statistically unchanged between the 2010 and 2011 surveys, the net confidence scores “fell off the table” for Blacks—dropping 22 points—and for Hispanics—dropping 15 points.

Conclusion

InfoSENTRY's annual national survey of attitudes on U.S. confidence in the accuracy of tabulated election results documents several unsettling trends for the nation's democratic institutions. First, the overall confidence in election results accuracy is lower than most academics, elected officials, and election administrators would like them to be—and their trend lines show overall decline over the better part of the last decade.

Additionally, there are significant “racial / ethnic group gaps” in confidence that U.S. vote results are accurate. Among the three largest racial/ethnic groups, the greatest gap in confidence lies between Whites and Blacks. The election campaign and election results in 2010 probably did little or nothing to narrow that gap. Indeed, both the general decline in and the racial / ethnic divide in confidence in election results increased after the 2010 elections. Lawmakers and election administrators now face the question: If we passed HAVA and spent several billion dollars shoring up the nation's voter registration systems and voting equipment (with a lot of paper trails) and those steps have had little or no effect on voter confidence in the accuracy of election results among any of the major racial/ethnic groups, what next?

This White Paper presents the findings of telephone surveys conducted among national probability samples of 1026 adults in 2004, 1018 adults in 2005, 1004 adults in 2006, 1017 adults in 2007, 1018 adults in 2008, 1002 adults in 2009, 1024 adults in 2010, and 1006 adults in 2011. All respondents were 18 years of age and older, living in private households in the continental United States. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage ($\pm 3\%$) points. Interviewing for this Opinion Research Center CARAVAN® Survey occurred in mid-January of each year. Opinion Research Center is one of the best known and most established opinion research organizations in the United States.

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