



BLACK VOTER FOCUS GROUP REPORT

AUGUST 2024



Howard Initiative
on Public Opinion



Black Voter Focus Group Top 5 Issues Report

Empower24 Initiative

Introduction

A Pew Research study reveals that by November 2024, the number of eligible Black voters is expected to reach 34.4 million, making up approximately 14 percent of the U.S. electorate (Moslimani, 2024). Black voters, along with other minority groups, will be crucial in shaping the outcomes of the 2024 presidential race. Unfortunately, the perspectives of historically marginalized communities, particularly Black people, are often underrepresented or misrepresented in surveys on key public policy issues, omitting valuable Black perspectives.

Now more than ever it is critical to tap into this population to understand their thoughts and opinions on the candidates and upcoming general election. The 2024 presidential election stands out as a landmark event in American history for several reasons. It occurs at a crucial moment when the nation is wrestling with unprecedented political polarization, global crises, and economic distress for everyday citizens. With less than 100 days remaining before the general election, the opportunity to understand this heterogeneous voting population is more important now than ever.

At this critical moment in U.S. politics, it is imperative to hear the diverse voices of a voting bloc that is often simplified as one homogenous group. The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of the attitudes, motivations, and perceptions that shape the opinions of Black Americans ahead of the 2024 general election. The results of this study provide essential insights on the issues most important to representative Black American registered voters today.

It is important to note that this research study was conducted with a commitment to impartiality and that all findings were free from bias or partisan influence.

Top Five Findings

The focus group discussions revealed many interesting and important findings on participants' perceptions of the candidates and issues believed to be most relevant in the election. The following are brief summaries of the top five (5) findings from the focus group discussions with quotes from some of the participants.

#1 Trump's Ability to Run as a Convicted Felon Viewed in Terms of (Un)Fairness

Participants from all six focus groups, even those who fully support Trump as the presidential candidate, are discomfited by his ability to run for president after having been convicted of felony offenses. In each focus group, this topic of conversation emerged organically, without any prompting or priming from the facilitator. While Trump voiced his convictions that may endear him to the Black community, many of the participants wonder what the fallout will be on perceptions of criminality, and in each discussion, participants expressed their incredulity by offering unique examples of the types of jobs and actions that are typically barred to felons.

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A female participant expressed concern and stated, “certain jobs felons can’t have, but this particular one can have the highest position in the land” (Female Independent Participant, 07.24.2024). A Male Undecided participant who voted for Biden in 2020 noted “30 something felonies.... You can't work at UPS Right? You can't even vote in some places. (Male Undecided Participant, 07.24.2024). A female Democratic participant responded that she was “taken aback [that] he has committed felony crimes and not only been charged with 34 counts, and he is still on the ticket.... He got 34. ... they [are] basically slapping us in the face with the Constitution in order to try to put him in the White House. And so that plays a part in one of the reasons I do not want him back in the office.” (Female Democrat Participant, 07.23.2024)

#2 Black Male Trump Supporters Do Not View Trump as a Racist

Young black voters in our focus groups who support Trump are ideologically conservative, and they do not view him as a devastatingly problematic presidential candidate. The young male voters see him as a “straight shooter,” and they are not offended by some of his recent racially tinged public statements, including his interview with the NABJ journalists. In fact, one young Black voter argued: “...historically Republicans have always been ...on the African American side ...like everybody's saying, ... Trump is racist and all that, but ... I don't even know how that narrative has even been pushed.... when did that ... start happening, [it wasn't] until he became the president" (Male Republican Participant, 07.25.2024)

Another staunch Trump supporter argued, after viewing the first five minutes of Trump’s interview with the NABJ journalists: “...he was helping black [people]... It's Trump [being Trump]... Trump is unapologetic. He's not no, yes man. Like how everybody else is...And ... if you look, there is no other white person, or ... just another person that's not black that, ... has more of support for [the] black community....” (Young Male Independent Participant, 07.31.2024)

3 Perceptions of Harris’s Previous Track Record as a Prosecutor Are Mixed

There were mixed feelings regarding Vice President Harris’s record as a previous prosecutor, however, most focus group participants showed little concern about her previous role as a prosecutor. As one Democrat identifying focus group participant stated: "I believe she was a good prosecutor. ... I have read different stories about how she punished criminals, ... that actually committed crimes. And to me, that's her doing her job” (Male Democrat Participant, 07.23.2024).

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“I've been seeing a lot of people talking about how many ... people of color [were prosecuted] ... It's gone from 50 to 10,000 is crazy. They're really, honestly, making up a bunch of stuff. But I decided to actually take the time to read through it. Turns out she only prosecuted 45 people out of the thousands that they were talking

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Similarly, a young Democrat female participant shared: “I've been seeing a lot of people talking about how many ... people of color [were prosecuted] ... It's gone from 50 to 10,000 is crazy. They're really, honestly, making up a bunch of stuff. But I decided to actually take the time to read through it. Turns out she only prosecuted 45 people out of the thousands that they were talking about. Then I also found out about her smart on crime, slogan, which. Ten plus years ago. Everybody, those around her basically called her soft on crime. And now here we are, 2024...” (Female Democrat Participant, 08.01.2024).

A middle-age female Democrat focus group participant voiced the same sentiment: “...in the words of the young folk. Let's keep it 100. She did what she was supposed to do. ... There is no reason to complain if, you know, your relative is committing criminal acts. ... She locked a lot of us up. A lot of us deserve to be locked up” (Female Democrat Participant, 07.23.2024).

While most focus group participants were not concerned with Harris's record as a prosecutor, some Republican and Independent participants voiced skepticism about her previous work as a prosecutor. A female undecided focus group participant, who did not vote in 2020 stated: "... I'm from the West Coast, so I'm ... right next door to California... I have lot of family members in Northern California. They are not favorable of her. They don't like her policies. They don't like the way she didn't respond to Black people when she was Attorney General of the state of California... I mean, she's a Black woman and we see that. And like with Obama, he was a Black man, and we saw that. We tend to support our people, but at the same time, are they best for us?" (Female Independent Participant, 07.24.2024).

#4 Young Black Women see Trump as a Major Threat to Democracy

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“...I feel like when we talk about ...Trump's legacy, like he literally issued an executive order that authored the exact legislation that is now in Georgia, in Texas, in Tennessee, in South Carolina, where, like, you can't learn about race, you can't talk about race.”

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Young female Democrat voters see Trump as a threat to the stability of the nation. Several of the women voiced concern for some of the recent decisions made by the Supreme Court and believe another Trump presidency will further erode the rights of Black Americans, citing book banning and the end of affirmative action as precursors of what his presidency will enable. As noted by one young female Democrat: “...I feel like when we talk about ...Trump's legacy, like he literally issued an executive order that authored the exact legislation that is now in Georgia, in Texas, in Tennessee, in South Carolina, where, like, you can't learn about race, you can't talk about race. They're banning books like, there's just so much censorship” (Female Democratic Participant, 08.01.2024).

Another young woman echoed this concern: “The Supreme Court justices that he nominated got rid of promises. They got rid of affirmative action, overturned the Chevron doctrine, like, there's so many things ... then the federally appointed judges that Trump [appointed]... he negatively affects [the] lives of ... black Americans even after he's not president. ... I don't think we could survive another Trump presidency” (Female Democratic Participant, 08.01.2024).

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Others had an even stronger sentiment towards former President Trump. One 23-year Black female stated, “he's an absolute danger and threat to the very existence of being Black in America” (Female Democratic Participant, 08.01.2024).

#5 Concerns about Trump's Candidacy/Legacy on Community Safety Persist

Fear of personal safety and the safety of Black communities in general surfaced as a major issue of concern among the focus groups. Participants voiced concerns of the fallout of both a Trump victory due to his call for giving police immunity, as well as fear of what retribution might be sought by his supporters if he does not win the election. An Independent Black

male voter suggested Trump is setting the stage for violence if he does not win. “He's creating an atmosphere for a civil war. ... And I think that's... what's going to end up happening, because he's got like a cult following ... whether he wins or loses. And these people can't take Ls [losses] for some reason. . . . And that's the sad part about it, because it's going to turn into, it's turning into an atmosphere of a civil war” (Independent Participant, 07.24.2024)

A mother in a focus group expressed: “I'm very fearful for myself. And I also just had a baby boy. So just imagine having a black son in America. And just thinking about him growing up here with... a target on our back because we're Black. But once this project 2025 go into effect, it's just not going to be safer for us at all” (Female Independent Participant, 08.01.2024).

Even some of the Trump supporters voiced concerns that his stance on police immunity will embolden the police to use excessive force. One young man who voted for Trump in 2020 and expressed the likelihood of voting for him again in 2024 was dissuaded only by concerns about Trump's seeming indifference about police brutality against Black people. He stated: “I'm seeing people want [to] defend themselves more from the police. ... I'd rather run into a person ... in an alley than run into the police officers. you know how scary [that is]... like you get pulled over, you really have a 50/50 chance of pulling away or not. ... it should not be like that man” (Young Male Independent Participant, 07.31.2024).

Purpose of Empower 24

During the 2020 Presidential election, Black voter turnout soared to 70%, a rise from 63 percent in 2016, in eight crucial swing states where the election results were determined by a margin of less than five percentage points (2020). For this study, it was important to reach the Black population in the same swing states during this pivotal 2024 Presidential election to access their perspectives.

The Howard University Initiative on Public Opinion partnered with Stacy Abrams the Endowed Chair of the Ronald W. Walters Leadership and Public Policy Center, and TargetSmart for the Empower 24 research initiative. Empower 24 aims to provide up-to-date insights into the concerns of Black voters for the 2024 presidential election. Together, the entities designed a research model to examine the opinions of participants who are registered voters in battleground states (AZ, GA, PA, NC, MI, NV and WI), gathering their perspectives and viewpoints through qualitative data drawn from in-depth focus groups.

Importance of Focus Groups¹

¹ As a caution, findings from qualitative research are not necessarily representative of the opinion of the population being studied. Though conclusions can and should be drawn from this research, it should not be thought of as a projection of all Black American voters in battleground states but rather instructive examples of how some of these voters are thinking about and talking about the 2024 election.

Our focus groups consist of interaction-based interviews that allow the researcher to observe conversations between participants around a particular topic or set of issues (Breakwell, 2007). The main purposes of focus groups are to explore respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions that are often not "meaningfully expressed by numbers" (Breakwell, 2007).

The results of this report shed light on Black Americans' views of specific issues related to the 2024 presidential election. Questions were designed to offer valuable insights that explore claims about concerns and preferences of Black American voters. This report provides this insight and reveals areas that will benefit from subsequent national polling with an appropriate sample size.

Methodology

Data Collection Partnership

Comprised of an interdisciplinary team of scholars from various disciplines, the Howard University Initiative on Public Opinion (HIPO) conducts national research on issues relevant to the Black American community. The broad range of expertise of the faculty allows HIPO to develop well-crafted research protocols that consider the nuances associated with the subject matter under examination. For this study, HIPO and the Ronald W. Walters Leadership and Public Policy Center collaborated with The TARA Group and their subsidiary, TargetSmart, for data collection.

TargetSmart are leaders in the field of survey research, analytics, and emerging voter trends who currently partner with MSNBC/NBC News, providing individual-level voter data, used by the MSNBC/NBC News team for their independent election analysis and on-air reporting.

How Participants were Selected

HIPO, in partnership with TargetSmart, used strategic recruitment efforts to ensure the study's purposes were addressed. The 50 participants in this study were selected according to specific inclusion criteria, which encompassed residency in a battleground state (name them) and self-identification as Black American. The recruitment process was conducted through a series of methodological strategies including targeted email communications and direct outreach via telephone. Each of the study participants was offered a \$150 gift card as an incentive to participate in the focus groups.

Description of the overall focus group sample

The six (6) focus groups comprised of Biden/Harris supporters, Undecided voters/Third-Party supporters, and Trump supporters. While all participants were Black Americans, representing various battleground states with age ranges between 19-75 years, they differed in thoughts and opinions. See Table 1 for a breakdown of the composition of each of the focus groups. We note that participants identified as Biden/Harris supporters, undecided voters or third-party voters, or Trump supporters prior to Biden's withdrawal from the race. The focus groups were scheduled after Harris emerged as the presumptive Democratic nominee. Accordingly, the table below reflects "Harris supporters" instead of Biden/Harris. Some participants noted that their intentions changed following Biden's withdrawal and Harris's emergence as the presumptive nominee.

Table 1.

Focus Group Participants

Focus Group 1	9	30-75	5 Females, 4 Males	MI, PA, GA, WI, AZ	Harris	7.23.2024
Focus Group 2	9	31-70	5 Females, 4 Males	NC, MI, PA, GA, WI, AZ	Undecided/3rd Party	7.24.2024
Focus Group 3	8	31-64	3 Females, 5 Males	GA, NV, WI, PA, MI	Trump	7.25.2024
Focus Group 4	8	22-29	7 Males, 1 Non- Binary	PA, NC, MI, GA, AZ	Harris Younger Male	7.30.2024
Focus Group 5	8	22-36	8 Males	GA, MI, AZ	Undecided/Trump/ 3rd Party Younger Male	7.31.2024
Focus Group 6	8	19-28	8 Females	AZ, PA, NC, MI, GA	Undecided/Harris Young Female	08.01.2024

To obtain a thorough perspective from participants it was crucial to capture a diverse population within the African American community to understand the broader implications of voting patterns, and varying thoughts and opinions. As noted in Table 2, the African American Trump supporters had varying ideologies but disapproved of Biden, while approving the Trump candidacy. All of the participants, voted for Trump in 2020 and all of them except for one, expect to vote for him again in the 2024 general election.

Table 2.

Trump Supporters Focus Group Participants

	2020 Presidential Vote	Biden Approval	2024 Presidential Vote	Party ID	Ideology	Education	Union Member
Almost certain	Trump	Neither approve nor disapprove	Republican Donald Trump	Independent, leans Republican	Conservative	High school diploma (or GED)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Trump	Disapprove strongly	Republican Donald Trump	Strong Republican	Conservative	4-year college degree	No member belongs
Probably	Trump	Disapprove strongly	Republican Donald Trump	Strong Republican	Liberal	Some college	No member belongs

Almost certain	Trump	Disapprove strongly	Republican Donald Trump	Not strong Republican	Conservative	4-year college degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Trump	Disapprove somewhat	Republican Donald Trump	Independent, leans Republican	Moderate	Non-college post H.S. (including vocational, technical, or trade school)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Trump	Disapprove somewhat	Republican Donald Trump	Independent, leans Republican	Moderate	Some college	No member belongs
Almost certain	Trump	Neither approve nor disapprove	Undecided	Not strong Democrat	Liberal	Post-graduate school or degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Did not Vote	Disapprove Strongly	Republican Donald Trump	Independent, leans Republican	Moderate	Some college	No member belongs

Additionally, the Undecided/Other focus group, found in Table 3, made up of both African American males and females, all had some college including 4-year college degrees and post graduate work. Those who voted in the 2020 election were varied, as of July 24, 2024, they were all still undecided, except for one leaning Democratic Independent, who expected to vote for Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

Table 3.
Undecided/Other Focus Group Participants

Vote Propensity	2020 Presidential Vote	Biden Approval	2024 Presidential Vote	Party ID	Ideology	Education	Union Member
Almost certain	Did not vote	Disapprove somewhat	Undecided	Not strong Republican	Conservative	4-year college degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Disapprove somewhat	Undecided	Independent/Unaffiliated	Moderate	Some college (including community college, 2-year degree, some college coursework)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Someone else	Disapprove somewhat	Undecided	Strong Republican	Liberal	Post-graduate school or degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Not strong Democrat	Moderate	4-year college degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Not strong Democrat	Moderate	Post-graduate school or degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Disapprove somewhat	Undecided	Independent, leans Republican	Conservative	Some college	No member belongs

Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Independent Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.	Independent, leans Democrat	Moderate	Post-graduate school or degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Disapprove strongly	Undecided	Independent, leans Republican	Moderate	Some college	Yes; respondent belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Strong Democrat	Liberal	Post-graduate school or degree	Yes; respondent belongs

Focus group number four, consisted of young African American Harris supporters who ranged in ages of 22-29. In 2020 all but one participant voted and those that voted, voted for Biden. As highlighted in Table 4 all participants expressed their intentions to vote for Harris in the upcoming 2024 general election.

Table 4
Younger Male Harris Supporters Focus Group Participants

Vote Propensity	2020 Presidential Vote	Biden Approval	2024 Presidential Vote	Party ID	Ideology	Education	Union Member
Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Democrat Kamala Harris	Independent, leans Democrat	Liberal	Some college (including community college, 2-year degree, some college coursework)	No member belongs
I don't know	Did not vote	Approve somewhat	Democrat Kamala Harris	Independent/Unaffiliated	Conservative	High school diploma (or GED)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Disapprove strongly	Democrat Kamala Harris	Strong Democrat	Liberal	High school diploma (or GED)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve strongly	Democrat Kamala Harris	Not strong Democrat	Moderate	Some college (including community college, 2-year degree, some college coursework)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Democrat Kamala Harris	Not strong Democrat	Moderate	Some college (including community college, 2-year degree, some college coursework)	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Democrat Kamala Harris	Independent/Unaffiliated	Moderate	4-year college degree	No member belongs

Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Democrat Kamala Harris	Strong Democrat	Liberal	Post-graduate school or degree (including medical school, law school, master's degree, or PhD/doctorate)	Yes; respondent belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Democrat Kamala Harris	Not strong Democrat	Liberal	4-year college degree	No member belongs

“For me, I would say I was kind of leaning into Republican, and now I’m kind of more even Independent, 50/50. I wanna hear debate quite honestly. Because of, I say, the age difference, and that injection of energy...I feel like on one side now, this injection of energy on the Democratic side, and I feel like it’s the Republican side that is still kind of fighting amongst themselves.”

Focus group five consisted of younger male Trump and “Other” voters. Their propensity to vote in the upcoming 2024 election, noted in Table 5, ranged from “probably”, “50-50” to “almost certain” with one 36 year-old man stating, “for me, I would say I was kind of leaning into Republican, and now I’m kind of more even Independent, 50/50. I wanna hear debate quite honestly. Because of, I say, the age difference, and that injection of energy...I feel like on one side now, this injection of energy on the Democratic side, and I feel like it’s the Republican side that is still kind of fighting amongst themselves” (Male Participant, 7.31.24). The propensity to vote in the 2024 general election is very high, with most expressing to vote for Trump or either undecided.

Table 5

Younger Male Trump/Undecided Participant Focus Group

Vote Propensity	2020 Presidential Vote	Biden Approval	2024 Presidential Vote	Party ID	Ideology	Union Member
Almost certain	Trump	Approve somewhat	Republican Donald Trump	Strong Republican	Liberal	No member belongs
Probably	Trump	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Not strong Democrat	Liberal	Yes; respondent belongs
50-50	Did not vote	Neither approve nor disapprove	Undecided	Independent, leans Democrat	Moderate	No member belongs
Almost certain	Trump	Disapprove somewhat	Republican Donald Trump	Independent, leans Democrat	Conservative	No member belongs
Probably	Biden	Disapprove strongly	Republican Donald Trump	Independent/Unaffiliated	Conservative	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Disapprove somewhat	Undecided	Independent, leans Democrat	Moderate	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Not strong Democrat	Liberal	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Strong Democrat	Moderate	No member belongs

“seeing Biden in the actual debate, that was really rough, and I think that a lot of people lost hope in our party being able to take the win. So now that she is going to be our candidate, I see a lot more excitement for sure”

As noted in Table 6, the young female voters' group was comprised of a mix of strong Democrat, “not strong” Democrat, Independent and Independent leaning Democrat. Although their approval rating of Biden for the general election, before Harris was named the Democratic nominee was mostly unfavorable, they still voted for him in the 2020 election. Only two participants did not vote in the 2020 elections. According to the young female voters there were a few still undecided after Harris entered the race but agreed that she did energize the party. One participant a 23 year-old Black female expressed that “seeing Biden in the actual debate, that was really rough, and I think that a lot of people lost hope in our party being able to take the win. So now that she is going to be our candidate, I see a lot more excitement for sure” (Female Participant 8.1.24).

Table 6
Young Female Voters

Vote Propensity	2020 Presidential Vote	Biden Approval	2024 Presidential Vote	Party ID	Ideology	Education	Union Member
Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Democrat Kamala Harris	Strong Democrat	Liberal	4-year college degree	Yes; respondent belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Disapprove somewhat	Undecided	Independent/Unaffiliated	Conservative	Associate Degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Did not vote	Approve somewhat	Undecided	Independent/Unaffiliated	Moderate	Some college	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Approve strongly	Democrat Kamala Harris	Strong Democrat	Liberal	4-year college degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Democrat Kamala Harris	Independent, leans Democrat	Liberal	Post-graduate school or degree	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Democrat Kamala Harris	Strong Democrat	Don't know / refused	Some college	No member belongs
Almost certain	Biden	Neither approve nor disapprove	Undecided	Not strong Democrat	Don't know / refused	Some college	No member belongs
Probably	Did not vote	Neither approve nor disapprove	Democrat Kamala Harris	Independent, leans Democrat	Don't know / refused	High school diploma (or GED)	No member belongs