

# AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

To: Voter Participation Center  
From: Henry Fernandez & Isaiah Bailey, African American Research Collaborative  
Date: April 16, 2024  
Re: VPC Poll of Eligible but Unregistered African American Voters

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## **Sample:**

On behalf of the Voter Participation Center, the African American Research Collaborative (AARC) implemented a poll of 1,001 African Americans who are eligible to vote but not currently registered. More than half (56%) of those surveyed report having never registered, with 44% indicating that they have previously been registered to vote. The blended phone and online poll was fielded from March 11 to March 24, 2024, and has a margin of error of +/- 3.1%. The research design included recommendations from a panel of African American scholars studying Black civic engagement who provided input prior to questionnaire development and shared their reactions to the survey results.

## **Key Takeaways:**

- Two-thirds of unregistered African Americans have at least some willingness to register, but for most the November election is not highly motivating.
- There is no predominant reason African Americans are not registered to vote, instead there are a diversity of reasons, with a similar one-quarter indicating that “they don’t want to vote,” “don’t like politics,” or “intend to register but haven’t been able to yet.”
- Unregistered African Americans lack emotional investment in politics relative to Black registered voters; but hope remains important for those more likely to register.
- Only half of unregistered Black people have confidence in the voter registration by mail process.
- Housing insecurity is common among unregistered African Americans, presents a logistical challenge to voter registration, and along with inflation is a top issue priority among those surveyed.

- When offered a choice between voting and finding other ways to make a difference, two-thirds of unregistered African Americans prefer finding other ways to make a difference.
- The strongest messengers to encourage registration are Black college professors who study elections and local Black elected officials.
- Tested messages were more persuasive among those more likely to register than among all unregistered, but within major demographic groups there was limited variation in message effectiveness. Messages that celebrate Black people’s successful political action or respond to rising discrimination tend to perform best across groups.

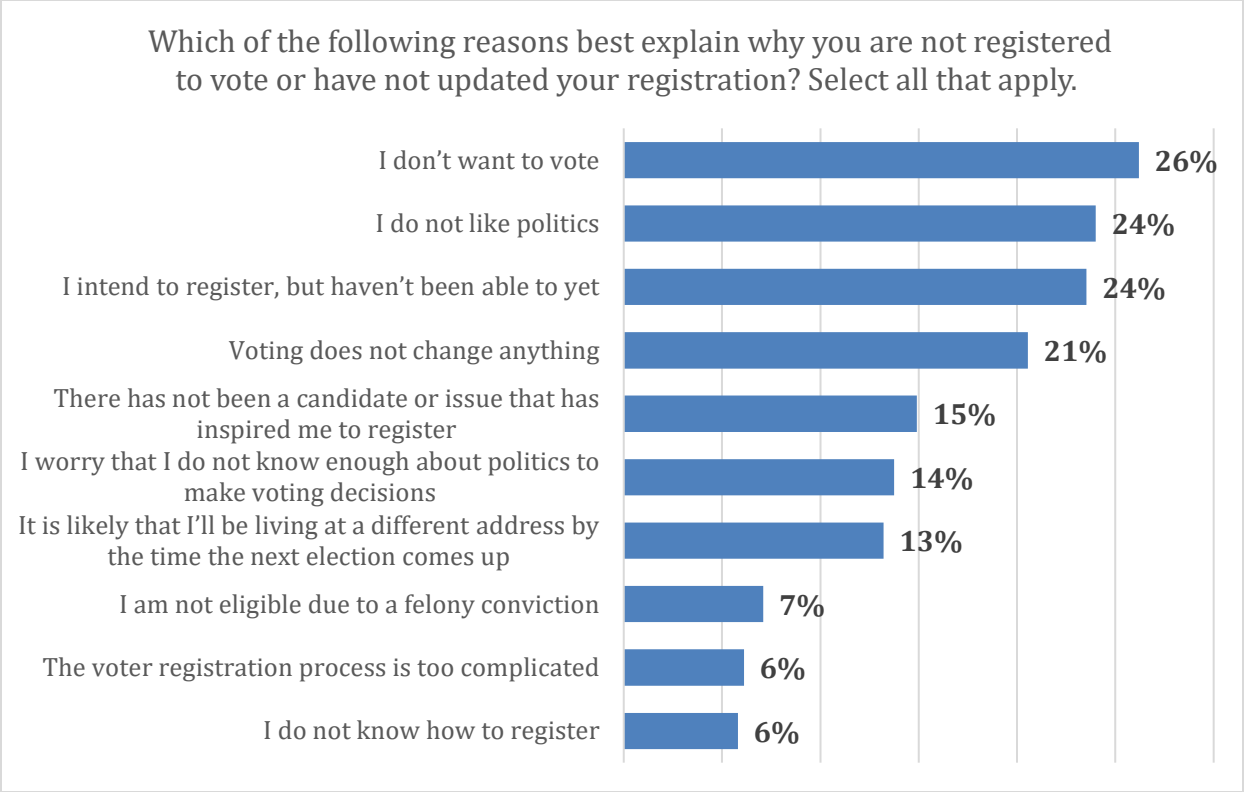
### Views on Voter Registration

**Two-thirds of unregistered African Americans have at least some willingness to register, but for most respondents the November election is not highly motivating as a reason to register.** We asked respondents about their intent to register in two distinct questions: an initial ask to assess openness to registering generally, and a later item gauging motivation to register in the context of the upcoming November election.

In response to the first question, 25% of the full sample consider themselves “temporarily unregistered and think of myself as a voter”; while an additional 42% indicate they are “unregistered for now but this may change in the future.” Answering the latter question, 14% indicate they will definitely register for the November election; while 17% indicate they will probably register, and 34% put their likelihood of registering in time for November at 50-50.

Across both registration intent questions, there is a consistent one third who are very unlikely to register. When asked to think about their status, 13% are “somewhat committed to staying unregistered” and 21% are “very committed to staying unregistered.” Similarly, when considering whether they will register to vote ahead of the November election, 13% indicate they will probably not register, and 22% indicate they will definitely not register.

**African Americans are unregistered to vote for a diversity of reasons.** No one reason dominates for why African Americans are unregistered. We offered 10 reasons, allowing respondents to choose as many as they wanted. The following chart reflects their responses.



**Previously registered African Americans are more open to re-registration than never registered African Americans are to initial registration.** In our sample, 44% report that they were previously registered to vote. Within this segment, three in four indicate they will either definitely register (20%), probably register (22%), or chances are 50/50 they will register (33%). Among the 56% who have never registered, just over half indicate they will either definitely register (9%), probably register (12%), or chances are 50/50 they will register (35%).

There are several demographic groups in which more than half of respondents indicate having been registered in the past, including those ages 45 and over, those with some college education, those living in urban areas, and those currently married.

**Unregistered African Americans lack emotional investment in politics relative to Black registered voters; but hope remains an important emotion for those more likely to register.** We presented eight different feelings that people commonly express in response to politics (angry, afraid, disgusted, hopeful, excited, indifferent, interest in taking action, and politics is rigged), in a question designed to gauge respondents' emotions about politics. The most common responses were indifference (29%), disgust (26%), hopeful (26%), and feeling that

politics is rigged (24%). Conversely, fewer respondents in our sample indicated feeling angry (15%) or excited (7%) about politics.

The most notable finding here is the relative suppression of feelings over politics compared to what we typically observe from a sample of registered African American voters. It may be unsurprising to see unregistered African Americans express such low levels of hope and enthusiasm for politics. However, even negative emotions such as anger and disgust are muted compared to our results from polls sampling registered Black voters in their feelings about politics.

The feeling of hope – which prior research has shown to be a crucial mobilizing emotion for African American voters – was the sole positive emotion to place within the top group for our sample. Still, we find the expressed levels of hope lower here than what is typical for a sample of registered African American voters. We do see consistency with the idea that those unregistered African Americans who say they are most likely to register view elections and democracy more similarly to Black voters than other unregistered Black people do. Those likely to register are substantially more likely to say they are hopeful about politics compared to those who say they are unlikely to register. 37% of those likely to register indicate they are hopeful, compared to 14% of those unlikely to register, with 28% of those 50-50 to register expressing they are hopeful. Hopeful is a top response for both the likely and 50-50 to register groups; however it is among the lowest performing feelings for those who indicate they are unlikely to register.

**Just half of unregistered Black people have faith in registration by mail, albeit with notable demographic variation.** We asked respondents about their confidence in a successful voter registration if they mailed in a registration form. Overall, 52% have confidence in the process of submitting their registration by mail. 22% indicate they lack sufficient information to have an opinion, and 25% lack confidence in the registration by mail process.

Confidence in registration by mail varies across demographics:

- **Prior Registration:** 63% of previously registered voters are confident that their mailed-in registration will be successful, compared to 44% of never registered adults.
- **Gender:** 57% of men in our sample have confidence in the mail-in registration process, compared to 47% of women.
- **Income:** There is a positive relationship between income and trust in the registration by mail process. This ranged from 46% confident in mail registration among respondents

making less than \$20,000 annually, to 64% confident among those making \$60,000 or more.

### **Key Obstacles to Registration Efforts**

**Most prefer to seek ways other than voting to make change in their communities.** The survey included a pairwise exercise, asking respondents to choose between an argument that people should register because it is their duty to do so, and a counter argument that people should focus more on finding ways other than voting to make a difference in the community. We additionally split the sample, such that half of the respondents read an argument suggesting it was their “duty as Americans” with the other half receiving a more race-specific “duty to the Black community” prompt. Respondents in both splits overwhelmingly preferred the argument to focus on making change through avenues other than voting by a 2 to 1 margin.

**Unregistered African Americans see building or owning a business as a valuable approach to making positive community change.** We presented eight options (owning a business, making change at work or in an organization, voting, marching/protesting, boycotts, communicating online, joining an advocacy group, and contacting your Member of Congress) in a question designed to gauge the perceived effectiveness of each for making change in America. We asked respondents to score each option using a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 meaning “not at all effective” and 10 meaning “highly effective.” Voting earned an overall mean score of 5.46, landing behind respondents’ top choice “building or owning a business,” at 5.94. Options such as participation in marches or protests and writing to members of Congress each earned scores well below 5.

Notably, those who indicate they are likely to register ahead of November score voting (7.19) higher than building a business (6.63). Those who are 50-50 to register score voting (5.54) behind building a business (6.14), a smaller disparity than those who are unlikely to register (3.83 voting; 5.12 building a business).

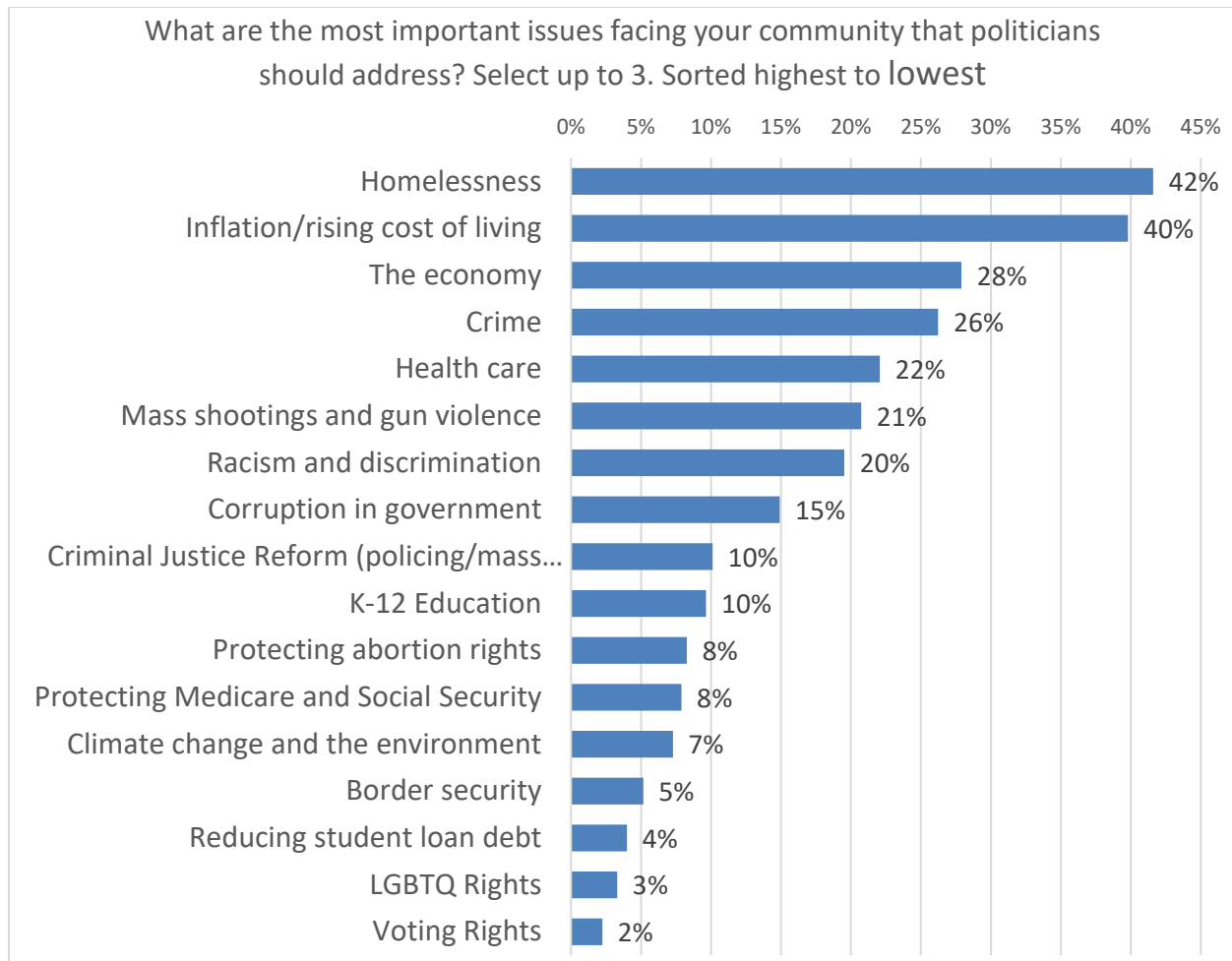
In prior AARC polls of African American voters, both voting and building a business have performed well, but voting is generally considered a more effective method of change, with younger African Americans sometimes having a mild preference for starting a business over voting. Thus, unregistered African Americans who are most likely to register are more similar in this regard to Black voters generally than to other unregistered African Americans.

**Unregistered African Americans have significant housing insecurity, presenting a structural problem for voter registration.** Nearly four in ten respondents answered that in the last couple of years they have experienced at least one of six types of homelessness that we presented. The most commonly reported experience was “staying at someone else’s home for free or very little rent, because you could not afford a place,” which was a recent reality for 22% of the adults in our sample. More than 10% had experienced some of the most extreme examples of homelessness, with 13% indicating they had spent time on the street and 10% indicating they had spent a night in their car because they did not have a place to stay. 62% of those surveyed had recently experienced none of the examples we presented.

The registration challenge here is structural. 20% of the recently homeless indicate that one reason they are not registered is due to their likely living at another address come election day. This compares to 9% choosing this reason among those who have not recently been homeless.

### **Issue Priorities**

**Homelessness and Inflation/Cost of Living are the top issue priorities for the unregistered African Americans.** We tested 17 issues, allowing respondents to choose 3. Homelessness (42%) and the rising cost of living (inflation) (40%) were the two most frequently chosen. The high score for homelessness may reflect the high level of housing insecurity among the Black unregistered population.



Homelessness and the rising cost of living were generally the first two choices for all demographics, with homelessness being number one for those less likely to register and inflation being number one for those more likely to register. We followed up this issue battery to understand what element of inflation had the most impact on unregistered African Americans. The highest scoring options on a scale of 0 to 10 were the cost of groceries (7.95) and the cost of housing (7.93).

### Trusted Messengers

**The strongest messengers for reaching the unregistered Black population are Black college professors and Black elected officials.** We provided a list of possible messengers, asking respondents to indicate whether hearing from each would make them more or less likely to register to vote. Respondents indicated they are most interested in hearing from Black college professors who study elections, with these professors earning a net rating of +35.

Local Black elected officials earn similarly high marks, garnering a net of +34. These top scoring messengers are consistent across all major demographic groups.

The median group included teachers (+21) community members young (+19) and old (+22). Lower scores came in for local businesspeople like barbers and hairdressers (+13), and religious leaders (+7).

The following chart shows the percentage of respondents answering that they are either much more or somewhat more likely to register if they hear from each offered person or group.

	Total Likely	Age 18-24	Age 25-44	Age 45+	Income \$60k+	Likely Will Reg	50-50 to Reg	Unlikely to Reg
Black/African American college professors who study elections	47%	54%	46%	40%	58%	63%	50%	30%
Black/African American elected officials in my state	45%	52%	42%	40%	57%	60%	46%	29%
Older people in my community	38%	40%	37%	37%	45%	56%	37%	23%
School teachers	36%	39%	36%	31%	47%	54%	33%	21%
Younger people from my community such as children, teens, or college students	35%	40%	34%	31%	42%	48%	36%	22%
Local business owners like my barber or hairdresser	31%	32%	31%	29%	33%	45%	29%	20%
Religious leaders	29%	31%	28%	29%	36%	41%	29%	20%

### Message Testing

**Tested messages were more persuasive among those more likely to register than among all unregistered, but within major demographic groups there was limited variation in message effectiveness.** We tested 12 messages on a 0 to 10 scale for persuasiveness in encouraging respondents to register. The results for the whole sample ranged from 5.24 to 5.72, while for



those “unregistered now, but could change,” responses ranged from 5.63 to 6.23. Among those who consider themselves “temporarily unregistered,” responses ranged from 6.34 to 6.81.

Top messages overall:

- In the last few years, Historically Black Colleges and Universities have received a record 7 billion dollars in federal funding. When you register to vote, you can support efforts to fund schools that serve Black young people.
- We must register because racist politicians and their white nationalist allies are working hard to reverse progress and take rights away from Black people.
- We must register so we can stand up to the politicians who insult Black voters and allow discrimination against our community.

Top messages for “unregistered now but could change”:

- We must register so we can stand up to the politicians who insult Black voters and allow discrimination against our community.
- We must register because racist politicians and their white nationalist allies are working hard to reverse progress and take rights away from Black people.
- In recent years, a record number of Black women judges have been nominated and confirmed to serve in the federal courts. When you register to vote, you can support people who are making our courts more representative.

Top messages for “unregistered temporarily”:

- The last two decades have proven that Black voters have the power to decide elections. When you register to vote, you increase the community’s ability to influence elections and demand accountability.
- Registering to vote shows the hope we have for the future.
- America wasn’t a true democracy until Black people struggled to make it one. When we register to vote, we honor the sacrifices of those who came before us and continue their work.

The “unregistered temporarily” group is once again responding to messages that are consistent with what we have seen in previous research as persuasive for registered voters. Given the thin range between highest and lowest performing messages, it appears that one’s relationship to voting is more influential than these messages. The less likely one is to consider registering, the less likely one is to be persuaded by any of these messages.

## Recommendation

Two-thirds of unregistered African Americans consider themselves either temporarily unregistered or willing to consider registering in the future. This likely means that a concerted multi-year effort of communication and persuasion could add hundreds of thousands of new Black voters to the rolls. But, when comparing prior research on Black voters done by AARC for VPC and other clients, this group of potential new voters thinks about voting and elections differently than registered African American voters do.

Unregistered Black voters are less likely than registered Black voters to believe that the outcomes of elections have a meaningful impact on their communities. Two-thirds of unregistered Black people believe we should focus more on finding ways other than voting to make a difference in their communities. However, there is substantial diversity within the unregistered Black population on the value of registering and voting. Unregistered African Americans that VPC is most likely to move to registration (those who consider themselves voters who are temporarily unregistered) value voting much more than the rest of the unregistered Black population.

AARC recommends that VPC test new messages in its direct mail that address the need to persuade unregistered African Americans to “get off the sidelines” using issues, messages and messengers that are most likely to resonate. Such a direct mail experiment would:

- Elevate the two issues that matter most to the Black unregistered population: homelessness and inflation.
- Target inflation messages to the cost of groceries and housing.
- Tout political involvement as a pathway for supporting the growth of Black businesses and increases in government funding to HBCUs.
- Consider race specific messages that address discrimination, politicians’ insults and white nationalism that target Black communities; as well as the elevation of Black women judges and HBCUs.
- Engage messengers that are Black college professors and state Black elected officials. Both groups are broadly trusted by all ages and demographics of unregistered African Americans.
- Address the lack of confidence in the direct mail voter registration process among half of the unregistered Black population.

Thus, a direct mail and digital program message could have the image, name, and experience of a Black college professor, followed by a statement from that professor on the importance of voting to address homelessness, inflation, and discrimination, while recognizing that recent

elections have led to more Black judges and increased funding for historically black colleges and universities.

*Professor Jason Smith, a national expert on the history of voting who teaches at [large private college], shared “Registering to vote helps us push the government to solve problems like homelessness and the cost of groceries and rent. It also supports the appointment of more Black women judges and funding for historically Black colleges and Black owned businesses.” Follow the instructions on this form carefully so you can be confident that your registration will be accepted, and you can vote in November.*

### **Additional Ideas from Expert Panel**

We shared the survey results with the expert panel that provided input to questionnaire development and asked for their reactions to the findings. We also requested that they share any opportunities for potential future research suggested by the findings. Several of their responses are captured in the memo. Here we share some additional reactions and opportunities for research suggested by panel members.

- For the group of unregistered African Americans who are saying that politics is not for them, what is for them and how could this be connected to voting?
- There appear to be two groups of Black unregistered, those who may need a nudge and those who are much further disconnected from politics. It appears that part of this nudge is around convincing them that there is the potential for a strong Black politics.
- Is there potential in combining economic and community solidarity messages?
- There could be value in looking at whether there is a geographic difference between those who have confidence in registration by mail and those who do not (as both are sizable groups). Is there a context and/or history that is placed based? For example, is there a difference in states where Black people have in more recent years been prosecuted for attempting to register or vote? Or is there a difference between VRA and non-VRA states?