

Exceptional Political Participation among African Americans: Countering the Overall Decline

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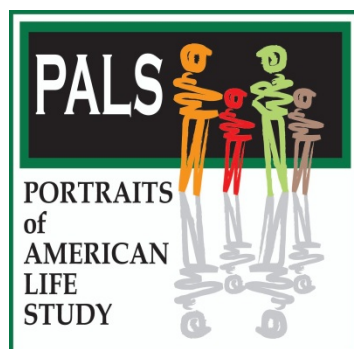


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Executive Summary

Americans, in general, have become less political active from 2006 to 2012. However, blacks have countered this trend with increased political participation. This black exceptionalism remains when narrowing the sample to respondents that voted for Obama in 2008. This suggests Obama's status as the first black President is responsible for this increased political participation among blacks.

Report

Overall Decline in Political Participation

Political participation in America has waned in recent years. Using the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) data, individual political participation is measured by averaging together involvement in the following nine political activities. For example, 43 percent of Americans signed a petition in the year prior to the 2006 survey, whereas only 33 percent signed a petition in the year prior to the 2012 survey, a substantial drop. The only political activity that increased over this time period is voting for a Presidential candidate in most recent President Election, which saw a slight increase from 68 to 71 percent.

Table 1: Percent of Sample Involved in Political Activity by Survey Year

Political Activity	2006	2012
signed petition	43	33
worked for candidate or party	4	2
contacted public official	23	16
tried to influence someone's vote	27	17
attended political meeting or rally	10	5
gave money to party, group or candidate	12	10
worked for religious organization involved in politics	4	1
participated in demonstration or protest	4	3
vote for President in previous election	68	71
Mean Political Participation Score	22	18

Note: Each activity (except for voting) was reported to have occurred in the past 12 months prior to survey date.

The mean political participation score (in last row of Table 1) averages each respondent's political involvement scores, which tallies his or her involvement in any of the nine political activities listed above. For instance, if a respondent 1) voted, 2) gave money to a

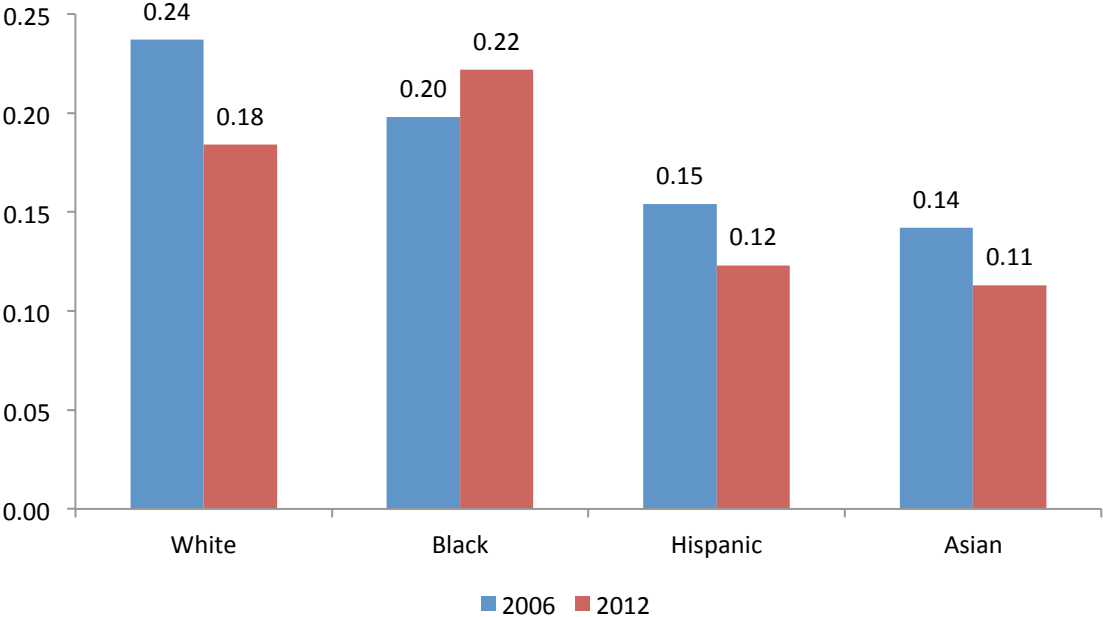
party and 3) signed a petition, she would receive a political participation score of 33 percent (3/9). The last row in Table 1 calculates the average political participation score for each year, again confirming an overall drop in political participation, from 22 percent to 18 percent.

This drop in political participation is especially shocking given the dates the survey was conducted. The 2006 survey was conducted between April and October. The 2012 survey was conducted between May and September. Since this survey is not solely focused on political participation outcomes, it was not scheduled to coincide with the political calendar. This means 2006 respondents were asked retrospective questions about their political activity in 2005-2006, after George W. Bush was re-elected President in 2004 and began second term in January of 2005. In contrast, 2012 respondents were asked the same retrospective political activity questions during the run-up to the 2012 Presidential Election. Despite the timing of the survey collection dates, which would seem to favor high political participation rates in 2012 because of the increased political participation options that coincide with a Presidential election season, we still see a substantial decline.

Black Increase in Political Participation

To further explore the change in political participation from 2006 to 2012, we look at changing rates of political participation by race. We find that blacks are the only racial group to see increase in political participation. The remaining racial groups see a drop in mean political participation.

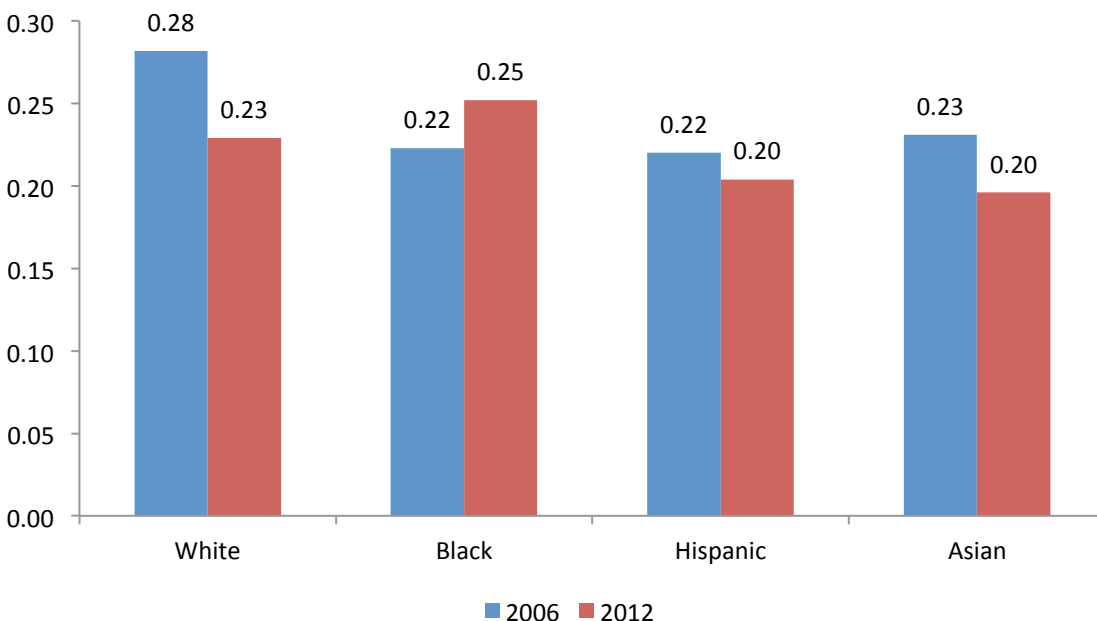
Figure 1. Mean Political Participation Score by Race and Year of Survey



Note: Native American estimates are not presented due to small sample size which yields imprecise population estimates.

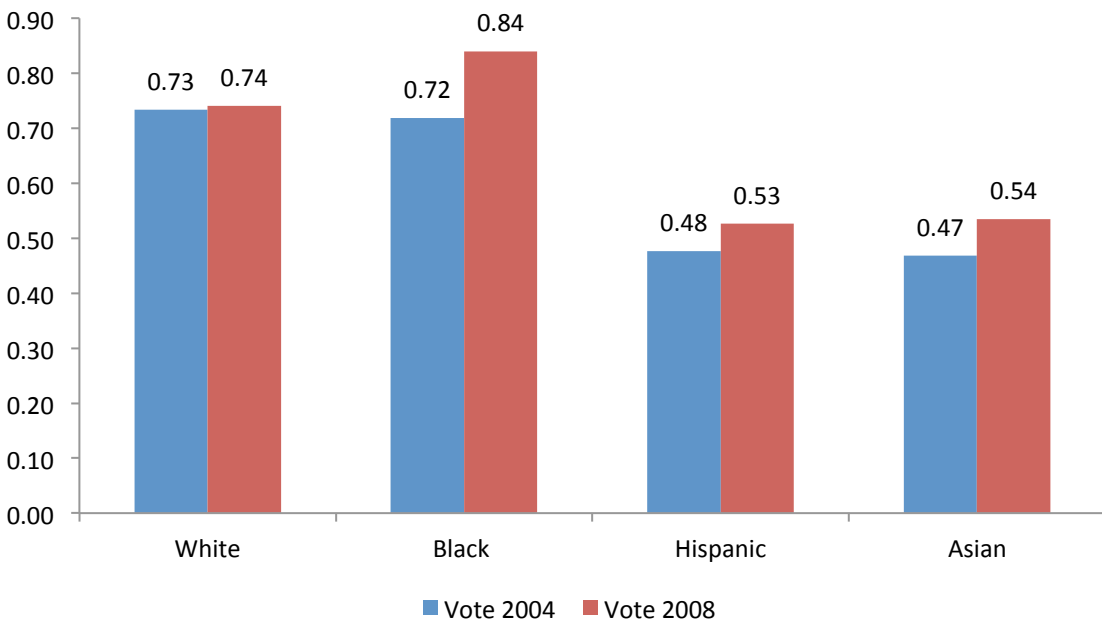
It seems likely that the ascendency of Barack Obama as the first black President in the United States is responsible for this boost in black political participation. In order to help scrutinize this explanation, I look at the same graph, but this time only among respondents that voted for Obama in 2008. We see that, over all, white, Hispanic and Asian Obama voters all see a decrease in political participation. However, blacks that voted for Obama saw a boost in political participation. In other words, non-black Obama voters still exemplified the overall downward trend in political participation. Only black Obama voters see an increase. This suggests Obama spurred black supporters to political action more so than supporters of other races.

Figure 2: Mean Political Participation Score by Race and Year Among those that voted for Obama in 2008



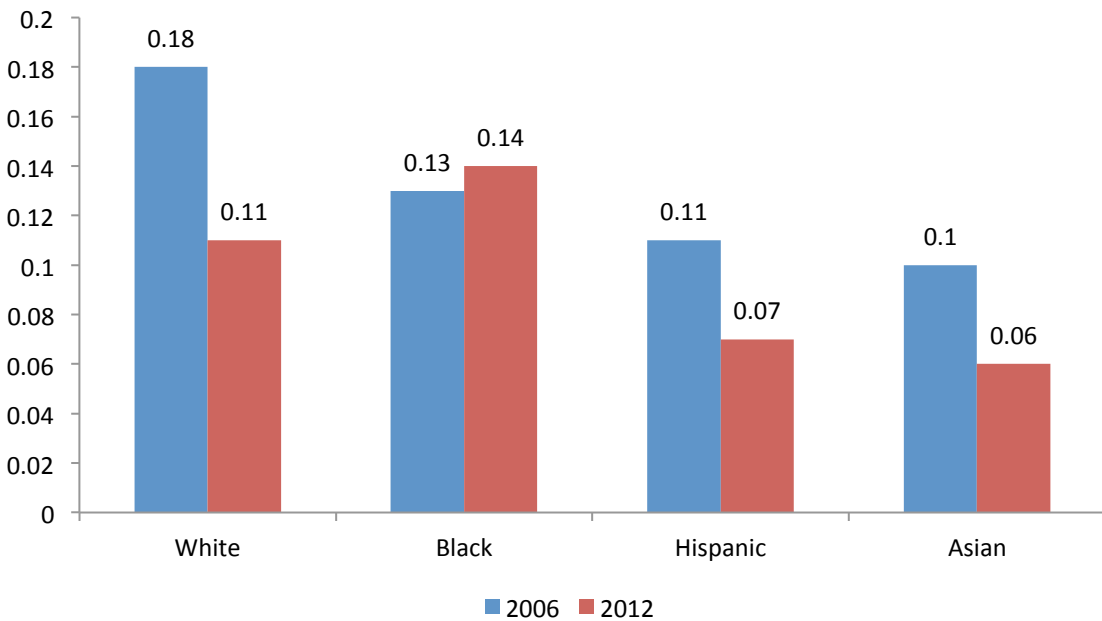
Most of the boost in political black participation comes from the large black voter turnout in 2008 (see Figure 3). Blacks saw a 12 percentage point increase in voter turnout, while Whites saw a 1 percentage point increase, Hispanics a 5 percentage point increase, and Asians a 7 point increase.

Figure 3: Percentage Vote by Race



While voting is an important component that helps explain blacks' increased political participation, black political participation is still exceptional even after ignoring their voting behavior. In other words, I calculate mean political participation scores for each individual without including their voting behavior. Using this 8 measure scale of political participation, each non-black category has a substantial drop in political participation, while blacks see a slight increase. This suggests the Obama effect transcended the impetus to get out and vote, and spilled over into other political participation activity.

Figure 4: Mean Political Participation (minus vote) by Race



Appendix: Survey Information

The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS) sheds light on a variety of attitudes and views of Americans. Wave II was conducted April through September of 2012. It interviewed 1315 Americans from the continental United States. To obtain a probability sample, yet achieve the goal of racially diverse oversamples, a four stage sampling procedure was used. Weights, using the 2010 U.S. Census, were then created to make the PALS sample fully nationally representative and of the highest scientific rigor. The response rate was 51%. The interviews, which averaged 75 minutes, were conducted via web, telephone, and in-person. The study was led by Michael O. Emerson, the Allyn & Gladys Cline professor of sociology and co-director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research. It was made possible by the generous support of the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and by supportive funding from Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research and the University of Notre Dame. For more information, visit www.thearda.com/pals.