

Outlook on Life and Political Engagement

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This study employs nationally representative panel surveys to assess the role of optimism and pessimism in shaping the political beliefs and behavior of Americans. How do demographic factors such as race and ethnic background, social status, gender, and religious identity, as well as the intersections between such salient characteristics, impact people's outlook on life and their political engagement? Because the panel surveys, conducted in 2012, are designed oversample underrepresented groups, the study also is able to assess the degree to which e.g., increased Black political representation and the recent economic downturn has affected Black women's political attitudes and political participation compared to other groups.

We have scant information regarding the ways in which expectations, beliefs, political engagement, and personal goals differ by demographic group. Especially the political attitudes and behaviors among contemporary Black women remain understudied. This is surprising, given that the life experiences of African Americans, and Black women in particular, are in some ways unique. For instance, Black women have experienced acutely the impact of the recent economic downturn, employment, and housing crisis, in addition to dealing with persistent stereotypes. Moreover, compared to women in other ethnic/racial groups, Black women are less likely to be married, and single Black women experience the highest poverty rates of any group. It remains unclear, however, whether such statistics are predictive of people's political attitudes and engagement, or their goals for the future. Drawing on insights from social psychological literature, we hypothesize that there is only a weak link between people's socio-demographic characteristics and their outlook on life and politics. Specifically, we hypothesize that, for Black women, an improving socio-political climate may negate grim social and economic prospects.