

Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History

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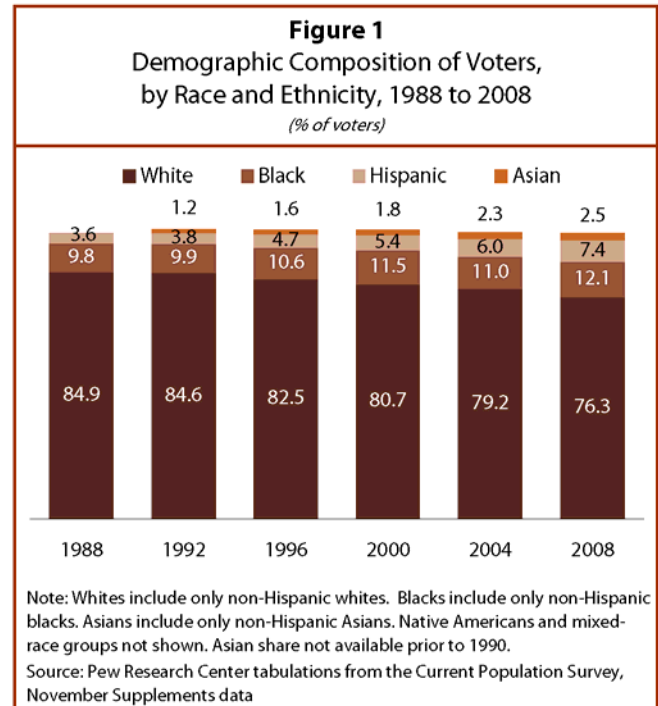
Executive Summary

The electorate in last year's presidential election was the most racially and ethnically diverse in U.S. history, with nearly one-in-four votes cast by non-whites, according to a new analysis of Census Bureau data by the Pew Research Center.¹ The nation's three biggest minority groups—blacks, Hispanics and Asians—each accounted for unprecedented shares of the presidential vote in 2008.

Overall, whites² made up 76.3% of the record 131 million people³ who voted in November's presidential election, while blacks made up 12.1%, Hispanics 7.4% and Asians 2.5%.⁴ The white share is the lowest ever, yet is still higher than the 65.8% white share of the total U.S. population ([Pew Hispanic Center, 2009](#)).

The unprecedented diversity of the electorate last year was driven by increases both in the number and in the turnout rates of minority eligible voters.

The levels of participation by black, Hispanic and Asian eligible voters all increased from 2004 to 2008, reducing the voter participation gap between themselves and white eligible voters. This was particularly true for black eligible



¹ The measurement of race in the Current Population Survey changed between November 2000 and November 2004. Prior to 2003, survey respondents could only pick one race, either white, black, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Asian or Pacific Islander. Beginning with all Current Population Surveys in January 2003, survey respondents could identify multiple race categories. As a result, demographic shares based on race for 2000 and earlier are not directly comparable with demographic shares for whites, blacks and Asians in 2004 and 2008. White, black and Asian demographic shares in 2004 and 2008 are for white only, black only, and Asian only populations, and do not include those of mixed race. These changes in the measurement of race do not affect the definition and measurement of the share Hispanic across all years ([Suro, Fry and Passel, 2005](#)).

² In this report, “whites” refer to non-Hispanic whites, “blacks” refer to non-Hispanic blacks and “Asians” refers to non-Hispanic Asians. Hispanics can be of any race.

³ According to the Current Population Survey November 2008 Voting and Registration Supplement, 131.1 million U.S. citizens say they voted in the 2008 presidential election, slightly lower than the 131.3 million votes cast for president as reported by the Center for the Study of the American Electorate ([Gans, 2008](#)).

⁴ The remaining share of voters in 2008 was of other racial or ethnic heritage. This group includes Native Americans and mixed-race voters. In 2008, 1.7% of all voters were of other race or ethnicity, up from 1.5% in 2004.

voters. Their voter turnout rate increased 4.9 percentage points, from 60.3% in 2004 to 65.2% in 2008, nearly matching the voter turnout rate of white eligible voters (66.1%). For Hispanics, participation levels also increased, with the voter turnout rate rising 2.7 percentage points, from 47.2% in 2004 to 49.9% in 2008. Among Asians, voter participation rates increased from 44.6% in 2004 to 47.0% in 2008. Meanwhile, among white eligible voters, the voter turnout rate fell slightly, from 67.2% in 2004 to 66.1% in 2008.

Table 1 Change in Voter Turnout Rates Among Eligible Voters, 2008 and 2004 (%)			
	2008	2004	Change (% points)
All	63.6	63.8	-0.2
White	66.1	67.2	-1.1
Black	65.2	60.3	4.9
Hispanic	49.9	47.2	2.7
Asian	47.0	44.6	2.4

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Much of the surge in black voter participation in 2008 was driven by increased participation among black women and younger voters. The voter turnout rate among eligible black female voters increased 5.1 percentage points, from 63.7% in 2004 to 68.8% in 2008. Overall, among all racial, ethnic and gender groups, black women had the highest voter turnout rate in November's election—a first.

Blacks ages 18 to 29 increased their voter turnout rate by 8.7 percentage points, from 49.5% in 2004 to 58.2% in 2008, according to an analysis by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement ([CIRCLE](#)) at Tufts University. The voter turnout rate among young black eligible voters was higher than that of young eligible voters of any other racial and ethnic group in 2008. This, too, was a first ([Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009](#)).

The increased diversity of the electorate was also driven by population growth, especially among Latinos. Between 2004 and 2008, the number of Latino eligible voters rose from 16.1 million in 2004 to 19.5 million in 2008, or 21.4%. In comparison, among the general population, the total number of eligible voters increased by just 4.6%.

In 2008, Latino eligible voters accounted for 9.5% of all eligible voters, up from 8.2% in 2004. Similarly, the share of eligible voters who were black increased from

Population Definitions Based on the Current Population Survey, November Supplement

Voting Age Population: The population of persons ages 18 and older.

Voting Eligible Population: Persons ages 18 and older who are U.S. citizens.

Registered Voter Population: Persons who say they were registered to vote in their state in the 2008 election.

Voter Population or Voter Turnout: Persons who say they voted in the November 2008 election.

Voter Turnout Rate: Share of the voting eligible population who say they voted.

11.6% in 2004 to 11.8% in 2008. The share of eligible voters who were Asian also increased, from 3.3% in 2004 to 3.4% in 2008. In contrast, the share of eligible voters who were white fell from 75.2% in 2004 to 73.4% in 2008.

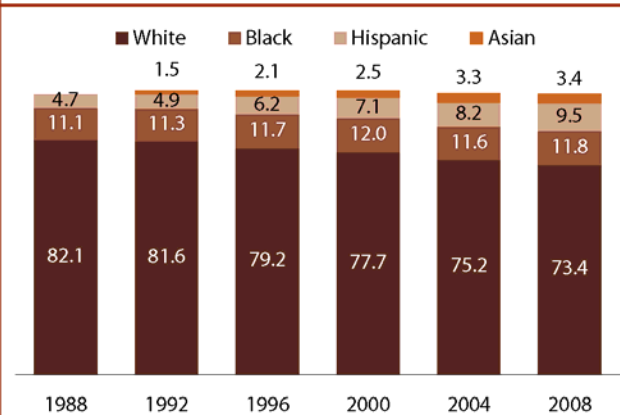
With population growth and increased voter participation among blacks, Latinos and Asians, members of all three groups cast more votes in 2008 than in 2004. Two million more blacks and 2 million more Latinos reported voting in 2008 than said the same in 2004. Among Asians, 338,000 more votes were reported cast in 2008 than in 2004. The number of white voters in 2008 was also up, but only slightly—increasing from 99.6 million in 2004 to 100 million in 2008.

The Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data also finds a distinct regional pattern in the state-by-state increases in turnout. From 2004 to 2008, the greatest increases were in Southern states with large black eligible voter populations: Mississippi (where the voter turnout rate was up 8 percentage points), Georgia (7.5 points), North Carolina (6.1 points) and Louisiana (6.0 points). It also increased in the District of Columbia (6.9 points).⁵

According to the exit polls in last year's presidential election, the candidate preference of non-white voters was distinctly different from that of white voters. Nearly all (95%) black voters cast their ballot for Democrat Barack Obama. Among Latino voters, 67% voted for Obama while 31% voted for Republican John McCain. Among Asian voters, 62%

Figure 2
Racial and Ethnic Composition of Eligible Voters,
1988-2008

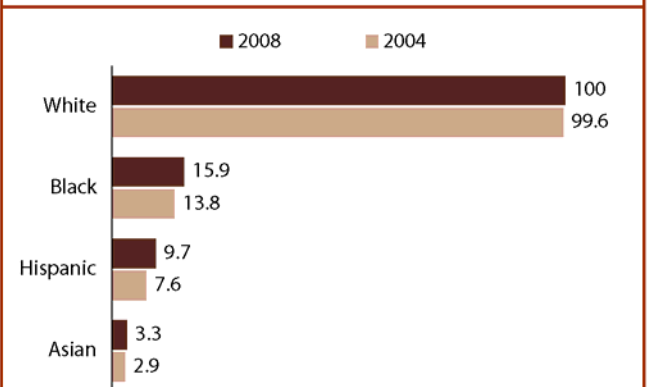
(% of eligible voters)



Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Asian share not available prior to 1990.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Figure 3
Reported Number of Votes Cast, 2008 and 2004
(in millions)



Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

⁵ According to Pew Research Center tabulations from the Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey, blacks constitute 35% of eligible voters in Mississippi, 30% in Georgia, 21% in North Carolina, 31% in Louisiana and 58% in the District of Columbia. Nationally, 12.2% of all eligible voters are black.

supported Obama and 35% voted for McCain. In contrast, white voters supported McCain (55%) over Obama (43%).

This report summarizes the participation of voters in the 2008 presidential election and follows reports from the Pew Hispanic Center, a project of the Pew Research Center, on the Latino vote ([Lopez and Livingston, 2009](#); [Lopez, 2008](#); [Taylor and Fry, 2007](#)) and Latino public opinion about the election and the candidates ([Lopez and Minushkin, 2008](#)).

The data for this report are derived from the November Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of about 55,000 households conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The November Voting and Registration Supplement is one of the richest sources available of information about the characteristics of voters. It is conducted after Election Day and relies on survey respondent self-reports of voting and voter registration.

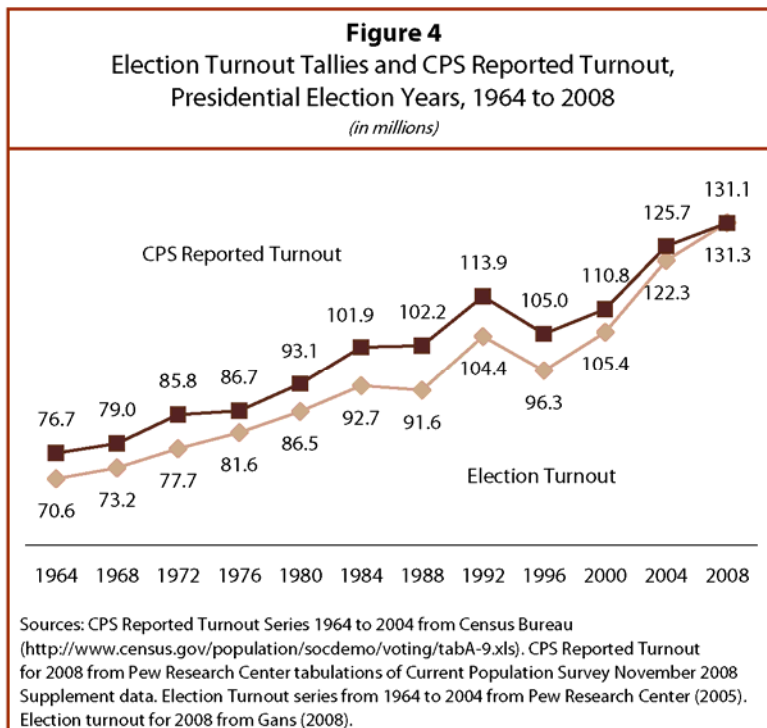
Comparing the Census Bureau's Turnout Estimate with the Reported Vote Tally

The Census Bureau's biannual Current Population Survey November Voting and Registration Supplement is the most comprehensive data source available for examining the demographic composition of the electorate in federal elections. However, because it relies on post-election self-reporting by survey respondents in some 55,000 households, these weighted CPS estimates of turnout never match up precisely with the actual number of votes tallied in the 50 states. According to the CPS, an estimated 131.1 million U.S. citizens voted in the 2008 presidential election – slightly less than the 131.3 million votes cast for president, as reported by the Center for the Study of the American Electorate ([Gans, 2008](#)) and other sources ([McDonald, 2009](#)).

This is the first time since the Census Bureau began taking a post-election survey in 1964 that its estimate is smaller than the number of votes tallied by the states. Prior to 2008, the gap had always run in the opposite direction, with variances ranging between a low of 2.8% (in 2004) and a high of 11.6% (in 1988). Since the 1996 presidential election, the gap has narrowed steadily, and in 2008, the lines crossed for the first time.

Election experts and scholars who have examined this gap over the years have theorized that it stems, at least in part, from a tendency of some Census Bureau survey respondents to report that they had voted even if they had not (Bernstein, Chadha and Montjoy, 2001). Another possible explanation is that in every election, some small portion of ballots are improperly cast and do not become a part of the official count—but the voters who cast such ballots report to the Census Bureau that they had voted.

There is no consensus among experts to explain the recent convergence in the number of votes tallied by the states and those reported by the Census Bureau. One possibility is that there has been a decline in spoiled, uncounted ballots in recent elections. Another possibility is that there has been an increase in voting by U.S. citizens living abroad – a group that is not included in the CPS survey ([McDonald, 2009](#)). A third possible explanation is that the accuracy of the CPS itself may have improved.



About this Report

This report summarizes the participation and characteristics of voters in the 2008 presidential election. The data for this report are derived from the November Voting and Registration Supplement of the Current Population Survey. The CPS is a monthly survey of about 55,000 households conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. The November Voting and Registration Supplement is one of the richest sources of information about the characteristics of voters available. It is conducted after Election Day and relies on survey respondent self-reports of voting and voter registration.

A Note on Terminology

The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably in this report. The terms “whites,” “blacks” and “Asians” are used to refer to the non-Hispanic components of their population.

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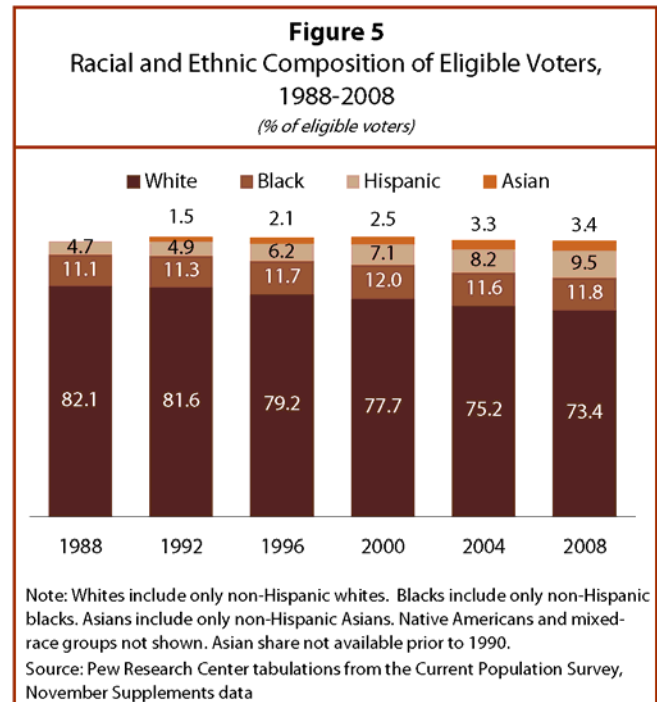
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Growing Diversity Among Eligible Voters

Population growth among Latinos, blacks and Asians between 2004 and 2008 changed the demographic composition of eligible voters. In 2008, while nearly three-quarters of all eligible voters were white (73.4%), a record share were non-white (26.6%). Overall, there were 206 million eligible voters in 2008.⁶

- Latinos increased their share of eligible voters from 8.2% in 2004 to 9.5% in 2008, an increase of 1.3 percentage points. In 2008, 19.5 million Hispanics were eligible to vote, up from 16.1 million in 2004.
- The number of Latino eligible voters increased 21.4% between 2004 and 2008, the largest percentage increase of any group.
- The number of Latino eligible voters grew faster between 2004 and 2008 than the growth in the adult Latino population overall – 21.4% versus 13.7%.
- Blacks increased their share of eligible voters from 11.6% in 2004 to 11.8% in 2008. Overall, 24.3 million blacks were eligible to vote in 2008, up from 22.9 million in 2004.
- The number of black eligible voters increased 6.4% between 2004 and 2008, second only to Latinos.
- The share of eligible voters who were Asian increased from 3.3% in 2004 to 3.4% in 2008. There were 6.9 million Asian eligible voters in 2008, up from 6.5 million in 2004.



⁶ Estimates of the number of eligible voters are likely overestimates because among those who are ages 18 or older and who are U.S. citizens, some are prohibited from voting in some states. This group includes felons or those who are mentally disabled (McDonald and Popkin, 2001).

- The number of Asian eligible voters increased 5.9% between 2004 and 2008.
- The share of eligible voters who were white fell from 75.2% in 2004 to 73.4% in 2008. More than 151 million whites were eligible to vote in 2008, up from 148.2 million in 2004.
- The number of white eligible voters increased 2.1% between 2004 and 2008.
- The share of eligible voters who are under 30 also increased between 2004 and 2008. Young people ages 18 to 29 represented 21.4% of eligible voters in 2008, up from 20.9% in 2004 ([Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009](#)).

	2008	2004	Change	Change (%)
All				
Voting age	225,499	215,694	9,805	4.5
Voting eligible	206,072	197,005	9,067	4.6
White				
Voting age	154,472	151,410	3,062	2.0
Voting eligible	151,321	148,159	3,163	2.1
Black				
Voting age	25,682	24,134	1,549	6.4
Voting eligible	24,322	22,866	1,456	6.4
Hispanic				
Voting age	30,852	27,129	3,723	13.7
Voting eligible	19,537	16,088	3,449	21.4
Asian				
Voting age	10,274	9,605	669	7.0
Voting eligible	6,912	6,526	386	5.9

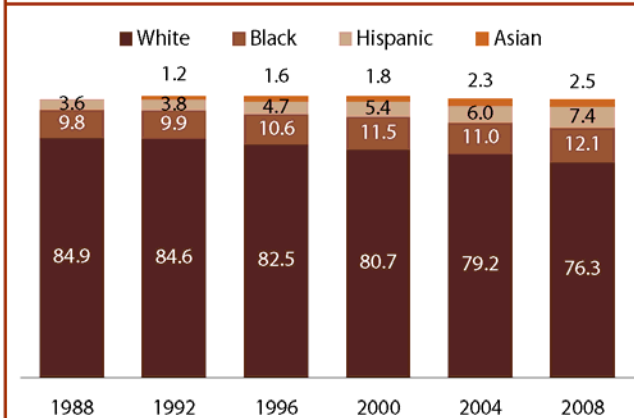
Notes: Voting age population refers to U.S. residents at least 18 years of age. Voting eligible population refers to U.S. citizens at least 18 years of age. Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

A Diverse Electorate

Voters in 2008 were the most diverse U.S. electorate ever. Nearly one-quarter (23.7%) of all voters in 2008 were non-white, continuing a trend of growing diversity among voters in presidential contests.

- More than three-quarters (76.3%) of all voters in 2008 were white, down 2.9 percentage points from a 79.2% share in 2004. The share of the electorate that was white in 2008 was the lowest in U.S. history.
- Blacks increased their share of the electorate from 11.0% in 2004 to 12.1% in 2008.
- Latinos also increased their share of the electorate, from 6.0% in 2004 to 7.4% in 2008.
- Asian represented 2.5% of all voters in 2008, up from 2.3% in 2004.
- Among voters in 2008, 17.1% were ages 18 to 29, up from 16.0% in 2004 ([Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009](#)).

Figure 6
Demographic Composition of Voters,
by Race and Ethnicity, 1988 to 2008
(% of voters)



Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Asian share not available prior to 1990.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Table 3
Number Registered and Number of Voters, 2008 and 2004
(population in thousands)

	2008	2004	Change	Change (%)
All				
Registered	146,311	142,070	4,241	3.0
Voted	131,144	125,736	5,408	4.3
White				
Registered	111,215	111,318	-104	-0.1
Voted	100,042	99,567	475	0.5
Black				
Registered	17,058	15,773	1,285	8.1
Voted	15,857	13,799	2,058	14.9
Hispanic				
Registered	11,608	9,308	2,300	24.7
Voted	9,745	7,587	2,158	28.4
Asian				
Registered	3,790	3,404	387	11.4
Voted	3,250	2,913	338	11.6

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Voter Turnout Rates

Voter Participation by Race and Ethnicity

Voter turnout rates among black, Latino and Asian eligible voters were higher in 2008 than in 2004. White eligible voters still have the highest turnout rates overall, but in 2008 turnout rates for whites fell slightly compared with 2004. Overall, the voter turnout rate among all eligible voters in 2008 was 63.6%.

- In 2008, the voter turnout rate among white eligible voters was 66.1%, down from 67.2% in 2004.
- The voter turnout rate among black eligible voters was 5 percentage points higher in 2008 than in 2004—65.2% versus 60.3%.
- In 2008, the gap in the voter turnout rate between white and black eligible voters was nearly eliminated.
- Voter participation among Latino eligible voters in 2008 was also higher than in 2004. In 2008, nearly half (49.9%) of Latino eligible voters say they voted, compared with 47.2% in 2004.
- Among Asian eligible voters, the voter turnout rate was up 2.4 percentage points—47% in 2008 versus 44.6% in 2004.
- Black, Asian and Latino eligible voters reduced the voter turnout rate gap with whites in 2008 compared with 2004.

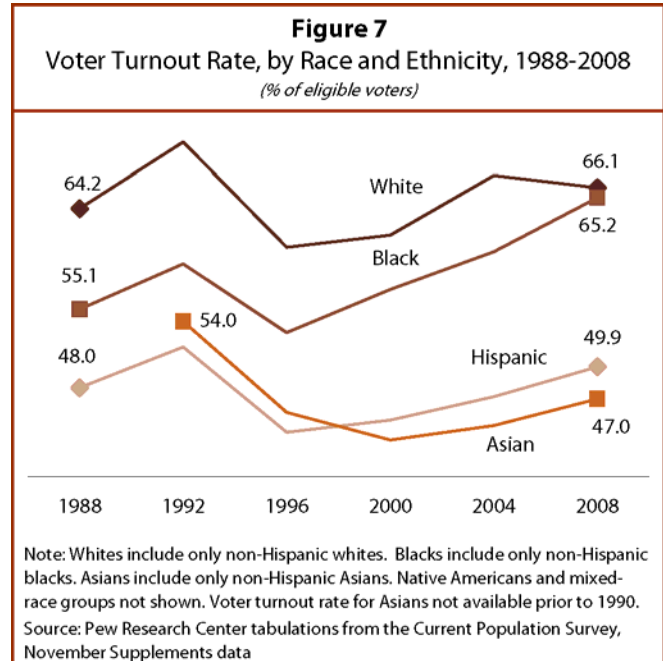


Table 4
Change in Voter Turnout Rates
Among Eligible Voters, 2008 and 2004
(%)

	2008	2004	Change (% points)
All	63.6	63.8	-0.2
White	66.1	67.2	-1.1
Black	65.2	60.3	4.9
Hispanic	49.9	47.2	2.7
Asian	47.0	44.6	2.4

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Voter Participation Among Women and Men, by Race and Ethnicity

Female eligible voters participated in the 2008 election at a higher rate than male eligible voters—65.7% versus 61.5%. Nearly 10 million more women voted than men.⁷ Overall, for the first time, black female eligible voters cast ballots at the highest rate among all voters.

- The voter turnout rate among black female eligible voters was 5.1 percentage points higher in 2008 than in 2004—68.8% versus 63.7%.
- The voter turnout rate among male eligible voters was lower in 2008 than in 2004—61.5% versus 62.1%.
- The voter turnout rate of male eligible voters in 2008 trailed the voter turnout rate of female eligible voters, continuing a trend that started in the mid-1980s.
- The gap in voter participation between male and female eligible voters was wider in 2008 than in 2004—4.2 percentage points versus 3.3 percentage points.

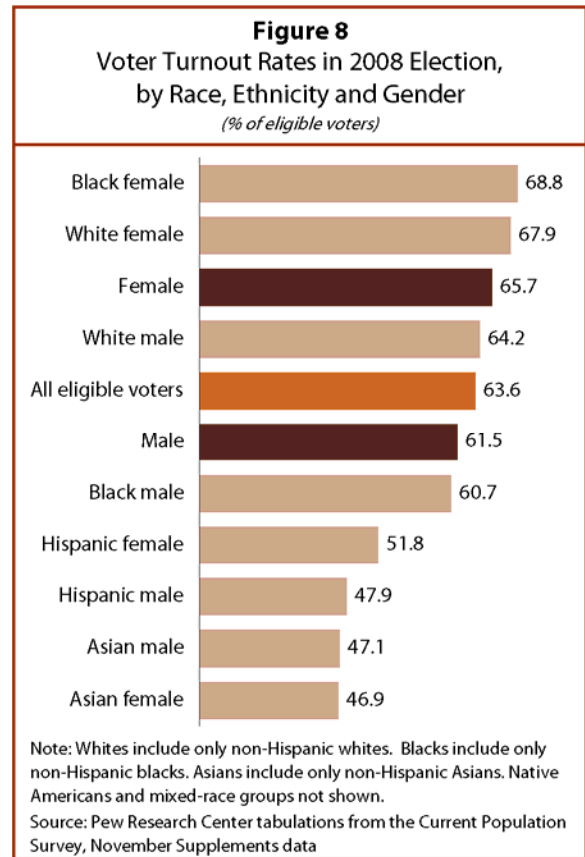


Table 5
Voter Turnout Rate, by Race, Ethnicity and Gender, 2008 and 2004
(%)

	WOMEN			MEN		
	2008	2004	Change (% points)	2008	2004	Change (% points)
All	65.7	65.4	0.2	61.5	62.1	-0.6
White	67.9	68.4	-0.5	64.2	65.9	-1.7
Black	68.8	63.7	5.1	60.7	56.1	4.6
Hispanic	51.8	49.4	2.4	47.9	44.8	3.1
Asian	46.9	47.0	0.0	47.1	42.2	5.0

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

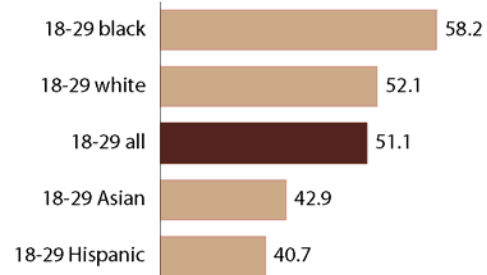
⁷ According to Pew Research Center tabulations from the November 2008 Current Population Survey, Voting and Registration Supplement, 70.4 million women voted in 2008, compared with 60.7 million men.

Voter Participation Among Younger Voters

Voter participation among young people was higher in 2008 than in 2004—51.1% versus 49.0%. More than 2 million more young people ages 18 to 29 voted in 2008 than in 2004 ([Kirby and Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009](#)). Among young eligible voters, blacks had the highest turnout rate at 58.2%—a historic first.

- The voter turnout rate among black eligible voters ages 18 to 29 was 8.7 percentage points higher in 2008 than in 2004—58.2% versus 49.5%.
- Voter participation among white eligible voters ages 18 to 29 was down slightly in 2008 compared with 2004—52.1% versus 52.3%.
- Young Latino eligible voters increased their voter participation rate to 40.7% in 2008 from 35.5% in 2004.
- The voter turnout rate among Asian eligible voters ages 18 to 29 was up 10.5 percentage points, to 42.9% in 2008 from 32.4% in 2004. This was the largest increase among all racial and ethnic groups for that age group.

Figure 9
Voter Turnout Rates among 18-29 Year Olds in 2008 Election, by Race and Ethnicity
(% of eligible voters)



Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Table 6
Change in Voter Turnout Rates among Eligible Voters Ages 18 to 29, 2008 and 2004
(%)

	2008	2004	Change (% points)
All	51.1	49.0	2.1
White	52.1	52.3	-0.2
Black	58.2	49.5	8.7
Hispanic	40.7	35.5	5.2
Asian	42.9	32.4	10.5

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

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Appendix: Data Tables

Table A1

Voter Turnout Rates, by Race and Ethnicity, 1988 to 2008

(%)

	All	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
1988	62.2	64.2	55.1	48.0	---
1992	67.7	70.2	59.2	51.7	54.0
1996	58.4	60.7	53.0	44.0	45.8
2000	59.5	61.8	56.9	45.1	43.3
2004	63.8	67.2	60.3	47.2	44.6
2008	63.6	66.1	65.2	49.9	47.0

Note: Whites include only non-Hispanic whites. Blacks include only non-Hispanic blacks. Asians include only non-Hispanic Asians. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Asian share not available prior to 1990.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements data

Table A2

Presidential Election Reported Turnout and CPS Turnout

(thousands)

Election Year	CPS		CPS - Election	Difference (%)
	Reported Turnout	Election Turnout		
1964	76,671	70,645	6,026	8.5
1968	78,964	73,212	5,752	7.9
1972	85,766	77,719	8,047	10.4
1976	86,698	81,556	5,142	6.3
1980	93,066	86,515	6,551	7.6
1984	101,878	92,653	9,225	10.0
1988	102,224	91,595	10,629	11.6
1992	113,866	104,425	9,441	9.0
1996	105,017	96,278	8,739	9.1
2000	110,826	105,397	5,429	5.2
2004	125,736	122,295	3,441	2.8
2008	131,144	131,258	-113	-0.1

Sources: CPS Reported Turnout Series 1964 to 2004 from Census Bureau. CPS Reported Turnout for 2008 from Pew Research Center tabulations of Current Population Survey November 2008 Supplement data. Election Turnout series from 1964 to 2004 from Pew Research Center (2005). Election turnout for 2008 from Gans (2008).