Nationwide Study: Racial Images Shape Opinion on Voter ID Laws

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A newly published study conducted by the University of Delaware’s Center for Political Communication reveals that seeing a photograph of African Americans using voting machines affected how white respondents answered a survey question about voter ID laws. White survey respondents who saw this image expressed stronger support for voter ID laws than those who saw no image. Seeing an image of white Americans using voting machines did not affect white respondents’ support. Research faculty David C. Wilson and Paul Brewer supervised the nationwide study.

“Our findings suggest that public opinion about voter ID laws can be racialized by simply showing images of African American people” said Wilson. “The resulting increase in support for the laws happens independently of — even after controlling for— political ideology and negative attitudes about African Americans.”

Voter ID Laws and Race

100%

"Voter ID laws require individuals to show a form of government issued identification when they attempt to vote. What is your opinion? Do you strongly favor voter ID laws, favor voter ID laws, oppose voter ID laws, or strongly oppose voter ID laws?"

73% 67% 67%

Black image White image No image

% Favoring Voter ID laws

Random assignment: The first version was not accompanied by any image, a second version was accompanied by an image of a white white person using a voting machine, and a third version was accompanied by an image of an African American person using a voting machine. Both images featured a relatively elderly person shot at an angle from which the person’s face (but not race) was mostly obscured.
Voter ID laws require individuals to show government issued identification before voting. Controversy surrounds the role of these laws in next month’s elections for Congress and state offices. A number of states have passed voter ID laws in the name of preventing voting fraud. Polls consistently show that a large majority of Americans favor the laws.

Some opponents of voter ID laws say they are designed to prevent African-Americans, students and low-income voters from casting ballots. The United States Supreme Court recently blocked Wisconsin from implementing its voter ID law, less than a month before the November 4 elections. A federal appeals court also struck down a Texas voter ID law, ruling that the law discriminated against African American and Hispanic voters.

The University of Delaware study shows white voters were somewhat more likely to favor voter ID laws when they were shown an image of black people, compared to white voters who saw no image. The survey, conducted online in 2012, included a nationally representative sample of 1,436 adult U.S. respondents. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of three groups. Those in the first group received a question about voter ID laws accompanied by a photograph of an African American using a voting machine. Of the white respondents in this group, 73% said they favored voter ID laws.

The other two groups of survey respondents saw either no image at all, or an image showing a white person using a voting machine. In both of those groups, 67% of white respondents favored voter ID laws. The difference between these groups and the group which saw an image of African Americans was 6%, a difference large enough to be statistically significant.

“Majorities in all three groups favored voter ID laws, but the margin was wider when white respondents saw a black person using a voting machine,” said Wilson.

The study found no effects of the images on African American and Hispanic respondents’ support for voter ID laws. However, the survey sample included fewer African American and Hispanic respondents.

The study was published by the journal Race and Social Problems. An earlier study by Wilson and Brewer, published last year in Public Opinion Quarterly, also found that support for voter identification laws is strongest among Americans who harbor negative attitudes toward African Americans.
About the study

The National Agenda Opinion Project research was funded by the University of Delaware’s Center for Political Communication (CPC). The study was supervised by the CPC’s Coordinator for Public Opinion Initiatives, David C. Wilson, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations, and the CPC’s Associate Director, Paul Brewer, a Professor in the Department of Communication.

Survey method

Results are based on data from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), which employs a matched random sample technique to survey members of an opt-in panel managed by YouGov Polimetrix. The 2012 CCES cooperation and response rates were 93 and 44 percent respectively. YouGov Polimetrix employs computational algorithms to allow for demographically representative samples to be drawn within each state and congressional district. The analysis used data from a cross-section of 1,436 U.S. adult respondents participating in a September 2012 survey. Of the respondents in the sample, 54 percent were women and 47 percent were men. In terms of education, 3 percent had less than high school education, 53 percent had a high school level of education, 10 percent had 2-year degrees, and 34 percent had 4-year degrees or higher. In terms of race and ethnicity, 80 percent were White, 11 percent were African American, 7 percent were non-White Hispanic, and 2 percent were Asian. Ages ranged from 18 to 87, with a mean of 51.4 and a median of 55. Average family income was between $50,000 and $59,000.

Measuring support for voter ID laws

Respondents read the statement, “Voter ID laws require individuals to show a form of government-issued identification when they attempt to vote,” and were then asked, “What is your opinion? Do you strongly favor voter ID laws, favor voter ID laws, oppose voter ID laws, or strongly oppose voter ID laws?”

Experimental design

The question capturing opinion on voter ID laws incorporated an experimental manipulation involving random assignment to one of three versions. The first version was not accompanied by any image, a second version was accompanied by an image of a white person using a voting machine, and a third version was accompanied by an image of an African American person using a voting machine. Both images featured a relatively elderly person shot at an angle from which the person’s face (but not race) was mostly obscured.

Image credits

White “voters” image: Bison Multi-Purpose Community Center, Wayne County, WV
Black “voters” image: DNAinfo/Leslie Albrecht, DNAinfo.com

Please contact Paul Brewer at (302) 831-7771 for more details about the survey’s methodology.