

# Casting a ballot: Duty vs. expression

## How will the Black vote impact 2024 election? Depends on which generation you ask

**Suzette Hackney**  
USA TODAY

Growing up, I was taught it was imperative to vote – always. My mother and aunt, who came from the deep South to the Midwest, remembered not having that right. They remembered people who died for helping register Black voters.

But this year, polls showed a trend that would have made my mother and aunt shudder: More Black Americans are uncertain whether they'll vote in the upcoming 2024 presidential election compared to 2020.

With the exception of 2012, when President Barack Obama was seeking his second term, Black voter turnout has been historically lower than white turnout, and it could be lower again this year.

At the same time, Black voters' power may never have been greater. Since 2012, the share of Black eligible voters has risen in all the swing states except Michigan, according to U.S. census surveys.

Not voting can be viewed as a profound statement of apathy for Black Americans, given our painful and difficult history.

Interviewed a cross-section of Black voters in those seven battleground states to understand whether they plan to vote and why. I selected two people from each state. The goal was to hear the conversations that happen across generations. Over lunch with coworkers, after church, in barbershops, at family dinners and even across social media. Some people are disgruntled; some are delighted.

I wanted to understand what the civil rights movement, and the right to vote, meant to them. But it was also important to hear the issues they did care about – in their own voices.



**Derrick Hall Jr., of Tempe, Ariz., says he's undecided in the election, but "if it comes down to those things, and it comes down to my vote, those are things I really cherish. And if a lot of people in one party agrees with me, then that's the party that I want to go with."** PROVIDED BY DERRICK HALL JR.

### Derrick Hall Jr.: Moral compass aligns with Donald Trump

- Age: 38
- Lives in: Tempe, Arizona
- Profession: Costco employee

Hall is from a military family and was born in Japan, an aspiring rapper and a Black man who says he's never experienced blatant racism nor felt oppressed because of the color of his skin.

"I grew up around a lot of different cultures and backgrounds and people from different ethnicities," he said. "It allowed me just to adapt and be able to relate to people from all kinds of backgrounds. I'm thankful for it."

Hall is deeply religious and sees abortion as a sin. He's not affiliated with either party but acknowledged his ideologies align more with Republicans'.

"It's not like I'm going to be in the front row with a MAGA hat on. But there are some important issues that I really hold dear, such as abortion and same-sex marriage," he said. "I believe that the original family is a man and a woman."

He's undecided in this presidential election, but "if it comes down to those things, and it comes down to my vote, those are things I really cherish. And if a lot of people in one party agrees with me, then that's the party that I want to

go with."

Still, he finds Vice President Kamala Harris to be charismatic and approachable.

"Right now, to be honest with you, ultimately I don't think my life is going to drastically change," Hall said. "I don't put my hope in things or people."



**Michael Hastert, of Chandler, Ariz., agrees it's important to boost public education and affordable public transportation, which he sees as Democratic priorities. But he supports Donald Trump's economic policies.** MEGAN MENDOZA/ARIZONA REPUBLIC

### Michael Hastert: Wants what's best for America

- Age: 33
- Lives in: Chandler, Arizona
- Profession: Costco gas station employee

Hastert, an Arizona State University graduate, will quickly tell you that he appreciates Republicans who advocate for gun rights. But he doesn't subscribe to one political party.

"I agree with a little bit more right than left, but I'm pretty dead center," said Hastert. His brother died in a motorcycle accident in 2014. The loss made him start looking at politics differently, because they dreamed of generational wealth, maybe owning a house together.

Now, he's worried about his wallet: "When President Obama was in office, I felt like things were pretty affordable and moving in the right direction. I feel like when President Trump was in office, he accelerated the economy. And then came Biden and I don't know what happened. Everything went up in price."

Hastert agrees it's important to boost public education and affordable public transportation, which he sees as Democratic priorities. But he supports Trump's economic policies.

He said he will definitely vote – but the decision will be tough.

"I'm going to get lied to by all of them," he said. "Both candidates are qualified. Kamala has a chance to sway me. But I think I'm like 60-40 or 55-45 going toward Trump. I just think that he wants what's best for America."

### Jordan Brown: A promise to rebuild

- Age: 30
- Lives in: Atlanta
- Profession: Georgia state adviser, Movement Voter Project

After Brown's brother was killed in 2013 by a police officer who ran him down with his patrol car, she decided to devote her career to addressing injustice. After graduation, she worked in the philanthropic world, raising money to affect policy.

But there was a disconnect. She wasn't reaching those who needed to hear about the power and importance of elections. So she started volunteering for local campaigns, educating voters on issues – and hearing about voters' issues.

People want to buy a house and build generational wealth, but struggle even to keep up with rent in an affordability crisis. Fellow millennials often bring up student loans and related debt, Brown said.

They see no way out. Older folks worry about health care and medication and health insurance affordability. Those in the middle want to start a family but keep putting it on hold because of the cost. Women also care deeply about reproductive rights and efforts to dismantle them, Brown said.

"The state of this country is in a bad place for many. But I think young Americans are showing through protests and activism that they're in the game to rebuild," she said.

She thinks of her two nieces, who are 22 and almost 16. "I tell them all the time, if they aren't willing to participate politically, they don't care about anything. I tell them that we determine our destiny," Brown said.

### Deborah Neal: No. 1 issue is democracy



**Deborah Neal, of Decatur, Ga., wants people to vote. As a recently retired schoolteacher, she's concerned about the apathy among some young people.** PROVIDED BY DEBORAH NEAL

- Age: 64
  - Lives in: Decatur, Georgia
  - Profession: Retired teacher
- Neal has been canvassing for Harris, a fellow member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, going to malls and other public spaces to ensure people are registered to vote. It's her way to show support for the person who might become America's first Black female president.

Neal supports Harris, but more than anything, she just wants people to vote. She believes in democracy. That is her No. 1 issue in this election. As a recently retired schoolteacher, she's concerned about the apathy among some young people.

If she were still in the classroom, she would be preaching about civility. Vote how you want, she said, but be kind.

"It is hard just listening to some of the ugly things that Trump and his supporters have put out about VP Harris. But we know that it's not true. And we know Trump is just really an embarrassment," she said. "He's making himself look bad. But it does bother me. It bothers me that they put out these lies and negative things about her."

### A. Nzere Kwabena: A grandfather ponders how men see the future

- Age: 59
- Lives in: Detroit
- Profession: Executive director of LGBT Detroit

Kwabena is a grandfather to three girls. If he could, he would erase misogyny and racism for them. Instead, he's fearful even more of that behavior will crop up during this election, especially because Harris is a Black woman.

"Though I believe that she's the right person for the right job, I don't believe that this nation will understand it because we're more sexist than we are racist," he said.

Kwabena predicts the election is going to be "very tight," particularly in Michigan. The state has a large Middle Eastern population, and many voters, especially young ones, have been displeased with the Biden/Harris administration's handling of the war in Gaza.

"Many of them wanted Harris to take a stand," he said. "That means one way or the other. And because she's in the middle, you're going to have a number of people who will more than likely sit out the vote. I believe she has to talk to Michigan residents who are sympathetic to the Middle Eastern conflict."

### Brian Smith: Front-row seat to the past, bird's-eye view of the future

- Age: 67
- Lives in: Detroit
- Profession: Professor

When Smith isn't teaching biology, chemistry, math and physics at Wayne County Community College, he teaches teens to fly. Smith is president of the Tuskegee Airmen National Historical Museum and runs the Tuskegee Airmen Flight Academy, which trains high school students for lucrative aviation careers.

For Smith, a man who has always voted Democrat, this presidential election is crucial. "I'm going for the people who are going to look out for the poor folks," he said.

For him, that means initially Biden, now Harris. "There are so many things I don't like about Trump. What I see with another Trump presidency is almost slavery coming back: that's the way it

will feel, because there will be no restraint on white supremacist groups," he said.

Smith grew up on the campus of Oakwood University, a historically Black university in Alabama where his father taught. He had a front-row seat for the civil rights movement. He learned what it meant to stand for something.

He wants to encourage his students to stand up, too. He worries they're too wrapped up in just trying to navigate life, handling the cost of college and student loan debt. He said he tries to stay impartial, but also teaches them what policies may help or hurt them – like student loan forgiveness.

"They're at least listening," Smith said.



**Singer-songwriter Leonor Paulo, 25, became an American citizen in 2019 after emigrating from Angola as a child. The Las Vegas resident spent time learning about the nation's government and will vote for president for the first time in November.** SANDY HOOPER/USA TODAY

### Leonor Paulo: New citizen finds a voice and a vote

- Age: 25
- Lives in: Las Vegas
- Profession: Singer/songwriter/model

Paulo was born in Angola. She emigrated to the U.S. at age 4 with two cousins whom she considers brothers. Her father died that year, leaving her mother alone. Two years later, Paulo started singing. Now she's enrolled in an online program at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. She works as a health insurance agent to support herself as she makes dreams a reality, performing at Vegas clubs. Weddings. Family reunions. Restaurants.

Paulo became a U.S. citizen in 2019 but didn't feel aware enough to vote in the 2020 election. So she spent time learning about America's government. She became involved with the National Action Network to educate herself.

"I didn't have my parents or my family really teaching me this is why it's important to vote," she said. "When you vote, you're putting people in place to help make laws and regulations for you."

"I support Kamala because of her stance on reproductive rights, because of her stance on immigration reform. As an immigrant, that's really important to me. Also, I've heard her speak about her vision about having an opportunity economy."



**Las Vegas resident La'rell Wysinger, 17, owns Chilly Barkers, a food trailer that serves chili cornbread, hot dogs and snacks. In Nevada, voters who are 17 years old can preregister to vote. Wysinger is excited to exercise his civic duty.** SANDY HOOPER/USA TODAY

### La'rell Wysinger: A small business houses a big dream

- Age: 17
- Lives in: Las Vegas
- Profession: High school senior/food truck owner

At age 17, Wysinger has preregistered to vote. Though he won't be eligible this November, he's excited to cast a ballot in the future. It's refreshing, someone so young who has already identified the importance of civic engagement.

"We are the future and it's important for our voice to be heard, especially with the economy," he said.

Wysinger wants to vote because as a small business owner – yes, he owns a

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business, a food truck called Chily Barkers – he wants to ensure he gets support for his side hustle while he pursues his ultimate dream: culinary school.

Cooking has always been his passion. He's learning how entrepreneurship works. And now, politics. He wants to be educated when he enters the voting booth.

Wysinger is aware most of his friends are only interested in girls, sports and applying to college. But he's been paying close attention to debates and reading about the candidates. He doesn't see Trump as the financial guru others perceive. He thinks Harris will help protect the small but mighty – people like him: "I want a president who supports small businesses and understands the struggle of a low-income family trying to make ends meet."



**Brunetta Gaither, of Charlotte, N.C., says she's worried about the cost of living for her fellow Americans. "I like my voice to be known," she said. "I've never missed voting, either local or national."** PROVIDED BY BRUNETTA GAITHER

## Brunetta Gaither: Fighting for younger generations

- **Age:** 65
- **Lives in:** Charlotte, North Carolina
- **Profession:** Retired shipping and technology expediting clerk

Gaither can't get over the million-plus Americans who died from COVID-19, including some of her family. She believes Trump mismanaged the pandemic.

"I cannot stomach another four years of Trump," she said. "He's a selfish person who only cares about himself. People died because he didn't know what he was doing. And now he just wants to keep himself out of jail."

Gaither is college-educated and solidly middle class. But she's worried about the cost of living for her fellow Americans. Because of her career, she knows how tariffs work. She says Harris has a better economic plan for average Americans.

"I like my voice to be known," she said. "I've never missed voting, either local or national."

For her, this election is about not just the economy but reproductive rights.

"I feel sorry for the younger generation, what they will have to go through. It's going to take us all to fight for them. Because if you get pregnant and you have a miscarriage, they expect us to stay out in the parking lot and bleed out.

And Black women are the main ones dying," she said.

## Kayla Young: A young voter finds her own views

- **Age:** 23
- **Lives in:** Monroe, North Carolina
- **Profession:** Aspiring medical student

Young is a graduate of Howard University, just like Harris. She works in a doctor's office and is applying to medical school, possibly to specialize in neurology; her mother is a stroke survivor.

Young recently purchased a home with her mother. She couldn't do it alone. She's grateful to have familial support and wonders what will become of peers who don't. The country's economic future keeps her up at night, as does its health care system.

"Growing up, I was used to seeing my family voting with the Democratic Party. It was what we did," she said. But Young has challenged herself to learn more, to read more, to educate herself on today's issues. She found her views still aligned with Democrats, particularly on health care.

As for campaign season, Young is over the personal attacks. The rhetoric. The lies.

"I feel like just the climate around politics has turned into something so nasty," she said. "It almost feels like we're not playing fair anymore. I just feel like sometimes it's turned into a complete clown show. And to be transparent with you, I think that is because of one person" – Trump.



**Louis Berry, of Pittsburgh, says he will not cast any vote for a presidential candidate in the upcoming 2024 general election. He has historically voted Democrat but says he is now disgusted by the party's lack of progress on reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans and by Democrats' policies on immigration.** JASPER COLT/USA TODAY

## Louis Berry: Tired of being taken for granted

- **Age:** 65
- **Lives in:** Rankin, Pennsylvania
- **Profession:** Retired custodial worker

Berry knocked on doors for Obama in 2008. He worked to educate voters about Obama's policies. He voted for Obama that year. And he never voted in a presidential election again.

Come November, Berry will again

stay home. He said he's tired of Democrats assuming Black people will vote for them.

"If I had to vote today, I'd be voting for Donald Trump. I'm not doing identity politics anymore. All Kamala is doing is raising money and making speeches," he said. "I like Trump's policies better, especially around immigration. They are trying to replace us."

He still votes in local elections. He wants Black Americans to receive reparations to address the historical and financial effects of slavery.

Berry worked for more than 20 years at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the state's largest health system, fighting to create a union. He didn't succeed, but his voice was loud. That's how Berry rolls, using his voice – or choosing not to – to get attention.

Democrats don't listen to Black Americans, he said. So "I'm sending a message to the Dems, stop taking us for granted. I'm not the only one who feels this way. We Black men talk about this all the time."

## Todd Hollis: Trump not a financial wizard

- **Age:** 56
- **Lives in:** Pittsburgh
- **Profession:** Civil rights attorney

Hollis is a single father raising two children. Ask about his main concerns in this year's presidential election and he'll quickly offer a list: civil rights, health care, women's rights.

Then he goes deeper. He describes the fear of a potential autocracy under Trump. He worries about a lack of ethics. He's concerned this election could be rife with schemes and tampering. Ultimately, people have to go to the polls, he said. It's our duty.

"It's really easy to take freedom for granted when you didn't have to fight for it," he said.

Hollis had confidence in Biden, and now Harris. He doesn't see either trying to enrich themselves by holding office – and said he can't say the same for Trump, who, he said, "represents everything I never want to see in another human being."

Some people "feel Trump is the better candidate because he represents lower expenses. When you try to explain to them that the president has very little control over gas prices, you can very quickly tell they are uneducated and they don't know," Hollis said.



**Lisa Blalock says she sees a lack of funding for public schools in Milwaukee. It's a state issue, but she believes federal support could boost test scores and the futures of Black students.** PROVIDED BY LISA BLALOCK

## Lisa Blalock: Trying to fight the good fight

- **Age:** 51
  - **Lives in:** Milwaukee
  - **Profession:** Corporate trainer
- Blalock pours herself into her church. She teaches Sunday school. She organizes voter registration drives. During the pandemic, she got a master's degree. It's because she has a desire to improve herself and give back.

"I'm still trying to fight the good fight," she said.

In Milwaukee, Blalock sees a lack of funding for public schools. It's a state issue, yes, but she believes federal support could boost test scores and the futures of Black students.

She sees a lack of employment for Black people. As in other Rust Belt cities, when the factories closed, the well-paying jobs disappeared.

"So there is a level of crime and poverty here that is probably worse here for Black people than it is in most cities," she said. "But I really do hope that with some of the things that Kamala Harris is suggesting, if she gets elected, I hope that some of this turns around."



**Many of Selika Ducksworth-Lawton's students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire are biracial, and she said she feels their connection to Kamala Harris. They found Joe Biden to be too conservative, but Harris seems more relatable to them, she said.** PROVIDED BY SELIKA DUCKSWORTH-LAWTON

## Selika Ducksworth-Lawton: 'You always vote'

- **Age:** 58
- **Lives in:** Eau Claire, Wisconsin
- **Profession:** Professor

Ducksworth-Lawton feels like it's come full circle. Not only does she teach history at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, but she teaches her 24- and 17-year-old children the meaning of their civic responsibility.

"My parents are from the civil rights generation," she said. "You always vote. This stuff is our birthright."

Many of Ducksworth-Lawton's students are biracial, and she said she feels their connection to Harris. They found Biden to be too conservative, but Harris seems more relatable to them, she said. They finally feel like Democrats are listening to them: the young, the diverse.

"The Democrats don't always follow through on their promises," she said. Ducksworth-Lawton read every word in the Project 2025 document tied to Trump.

"I think letting people with that kind of hubris control the executive branch and control the Supreme Court will remove our rights, but also destroy this economy," she said. "People with high school diplomas who are out there trying to survive, who feel that nobody looks out for them, can easily be persuaded not necessarily to vote for Trump, but to just not vote."

Contributing: Suhail Bhat, USA TODAY