

ANALYSIS

# Large Racial Turnout Gap Persisted in 2020 Election

70.9 percent of white voters cast ballots compared with only 58.4 percent of nonwhite voters — a disparity that will worsen with new restrictive voting laws.



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Kevin Morris

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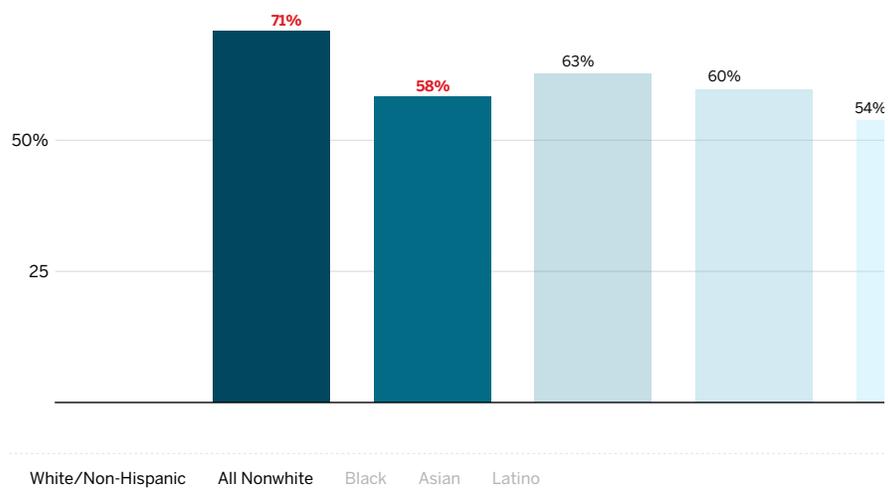
August 6, 2021

In the 2020 election, voter **turnout surged** as more Americans cast ballots than in any presidential election in a century, despite a global pandemic. This was true for the entire electorate as well as for each racial group — more Black Americans voted in 2020 than any presidential election since 2012, and Latino Americans and Asian Americans also surpassed their previous turnout records. (Unfortunately, we don't have comparable figures for Native Americans.)

These successes have been and should be celebrated. However, they must not be mistaken for signs that racial discrimination in voting is no longer an enormous problem, one that continues to advantage white voters to a degree that must be remedied.

The 2020 election must also be remembered for another turnout statistic: 70.9 percent of white voters cast ballots while only 58.4 percent of nonwhite voters did. As the graph below shows, 62.6 percent of Black American voters, 53.7 percent of Latino American voters, and 59.7 percent of Asian American voters cast ballots in 2020.

### Voter Turnout by Race in 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

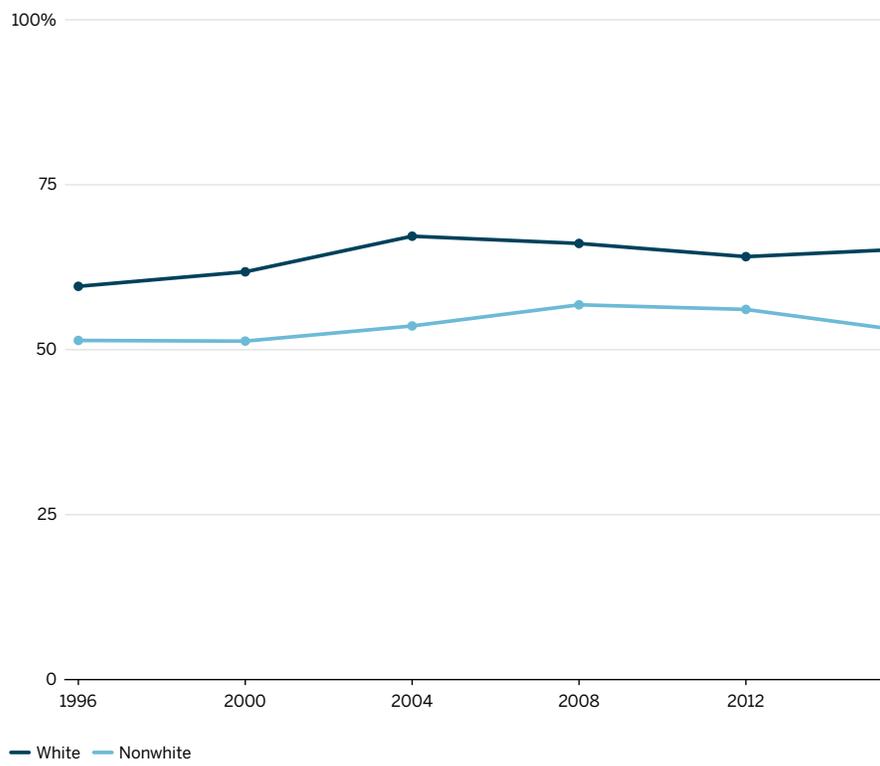
There is **ample evidence** that the **sorts of barriers** being introduced this year **disproportionately reduce turnout** for **voters of color**. The gaps between white and nonwhite voters are bound to get worse. That's why it's necessary to reverse these new voting restrictions.

## Narrowing the gap, but only temporarily

The difference between white and nonwhite voter turnout has remained relatively unchanged over the last six presidential elections, with a few notable fluctuations. In 2008 and 2012, Barack Obama was on the ballot, and turnout among Black voters in those elections was higher than at any point since 1996. And in 2012, the gap between white and nonwhite voter turnout narrowed to 8 percentage points, the lowest since 1996.

The graph below shows that after reaching that record low in 2012, the turnout gap expanded once again between white voters and nonwhite voters, reaching 12.6 percentage points in the 2016 presidential election and 12.5 in 2020.

### Voter Turnout, White v. Nonwhite, 1996-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

The graph also shows a decrease in nonwhite voter turnout between the 2008 and 2012 elections. After the record turnout in 2008, many state legislatures reacted by quickly passing a spate of **new restrictive voting laws** that made it disproportionately difficult for voters of color to cast ballots.

In 2013, the Supreme Court used the narrowing of the turnout gap between white and Black voters in 2008 and 2012, as seen in the following graph, to justify gutting key protections against racial discrimination in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder* made it easier for states to enact restrictive policies.

## The gaps between white voters and individual racial groups

2021 looks like 2009 in that high nonwhite voter turnout in the presidential election has been followed by restrictive voting laws, but there's a crucial difference. As the graph above indicates, the racial turnout gap narrowed between 2004 and 2008, but not between 2016 and 2020. The 2021 backlash is coming at a point when the disparities in turnout between racial groups are significantly larger than they were in 2008 and 2012.

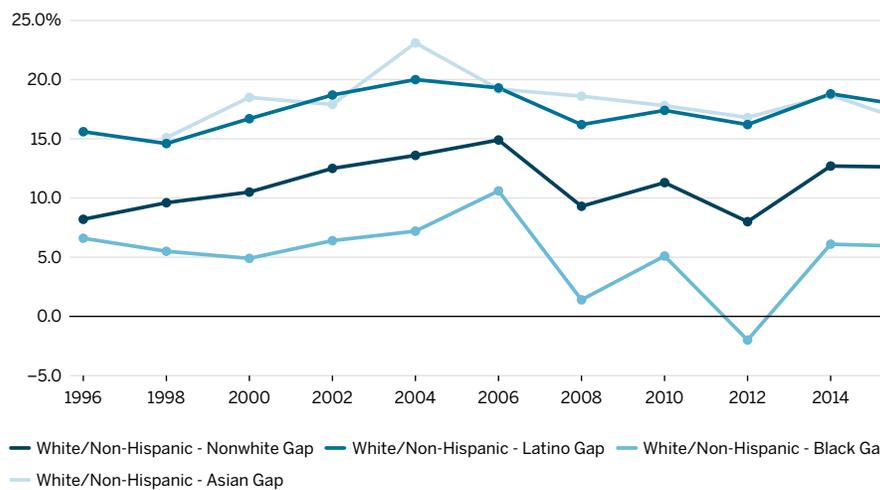
While the gap between nonwhite voters and white voters has stayed about the same in the 2016 and 2020 elections, the gaps between white voters and voters of specific racial groups have varied. As the graph below demonstrates, the white-Asian gap narrowed significantly, from 16.3 percentage points in 2016 to 11.3 points

last year, even as the white-Black turnout gap widened relative to 2016, going from 5.9 percentage points to 8.3 points. This is not to say that the white-Asian gap closed. As the graph makes clear, the white-Asian gap had previously been very large, and although the white-Asian turnout gap reached its lowest level in at least two decades in 2020, white voter turnout was still more than 10 percentage points higher than that of Asian Americans.

This narrowing of the white-Asian gap was offset by an increase in the white-Black turnout gap from 2016 to 2020. As the graph shows, the white-Black gap has consistently grown since 2012. In 2020, it reached the highest point in a presidential election since at least 1996.

The white-Latino turnout gap has previously been very large, and the same was true in 2020. At 17.2 percentage points, the 2020 white-Latino turnout gap was larger than the gaps between white voters and other racial groups, and it remained virtually unchanged from 2016.

### Voter Turnout Gap by Race, 1996-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

As noted earlier, the Census Bureau data we draw on for this analysis fails to give us insight into the relative turnout of another group regularly impacted by discriminatory voting laws: Native Americans. However, we do know from the [National Congress of American Indians](#) that registered voters in this group have a lower turnout rate than other racial groups and face [unique difficulties accessing the ballot box](#) along with the ones faced by other nonwhite Americans.

## 2008 backlash versus today

Like the backlash after high turnout in 2008, we are now experiencing another [wave of restrictive voting laws](#), along with [Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee](#), another Supreme Court ruling that weakens the Voting Rights Act and will make challenging racially discriminatory voting laws even harder. This backlash, however, does not come on the heels of the narrowest racial turnout gap in a generation. This time, it follows a racial turnout gap that remained steady and even grew for Black Americans.

Across the United States, political organizers successfully mobilized communities of color in 2020. But the record-breaking overall turnout was not enough to close the racial turnout gap. And in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's *Brnovich* decision in, the Voting Rights Act's protections for racial minorities are weaker than ever. It is imperative to stop the new restrictive voting laws and provide tools to fight race discrimination in voting.

*Note: Throughout this analysis, we divide the estimated number of ballots cast by eligible voters (the estimated citizen population above the age of 18) for each race from Table 4(B) for 2006–2020, Table 4(A) for 2000–2004 and 1996, and Table 4 for 1998.*

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