

2005 Racial Attitudes and the Katrina Disaster Study

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Initial Report

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Introduction

In late August 2005 the levees of New Orleans failed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The order to evacuate the city had come twenty-four hours earlier. Many of the city's residents had fled in advance of the storm, but a significant portion of New Orleans' citizens remained. It was, after all, the end of the month. Working class and poor people in the city were still a week away from payday. More than one in four individuals living in the city of New Orleans lived below the federally defined poverty line: \$16,000 annually for a family of three.¹ Moreover, more than a quarter of New Orleans' residents did not own private vehicles. Unable to escape, they fled to shelters of last resort in the city's Superdome and Convention Center. They headed to the attics of their home.

Although the city was spared a direct hit by the eye of the storm, Katrina's sideswipe was powerful enough to unleash the river and lake waters that surround the city. The entire nation was riveted to media coverage of the disaster, but black and white Americans drew very different lessons from the experience. This study uses both national survey data and interviews with returned New Orleans residents in November 2005 to understand the intersection of race and perception in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Following the disaster, the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago supported a national survey more than 1200 Americans to gauge political and racial attitudes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Principal investigators are Michael Dawson, Cathy Cohen and Melissa Harris-Lacewell.

The data were collected by Knowledge Networks between October 28, 2005 and November 17, 2005. Knowledge Networks employs a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) telephone methodology to develop a representative sample of households for participation in its panel. Once a Knowledge Networks household is selected, members are contacted first by an express delivery mailing and then by telephone for enrollment in the *Knowledge Networks^{STM}* panel. The panel structure enables clients to conduct surveys of low-incidence populations, such as African Americans, more efficiently and inexpensively than would otherwise be possible. Every participating Knowledge Networks household receives free hardware, free Internet access, free e-mail accounts and ongoing technical support. Participants receive a short multimedia survey about once a week. Surveys are delivered by e-mail on the same standardized hardware, through the television set. The data include responses from 1252 Americans. The racial composition of the respondents is as follows: White: 703, Black: 487, Hispanic: 52, Other: 10. Interviews were conducted in person by Melissa Harris Lacewell in various locations in New Orleans November 11-18, 2005. Interviews included more than 24 personal discussions with local residents and minutes from three community meetings about rebuilding efforts.

This initial report highlights findings in three areas: (1) racial gap in public opinion surrounding the disaster; (2) effects of media framing on white and black public opinion; (3) attitudes of Katrina victims about the causes of the disaster.

¹ This is double the annual rate of poverty for the entire U.S. which is closer to 12.7%.

Racial Gap in Opinion

Studies of contemporary public opinion in both the academy and the media have convincingly demonstrated a wide and persistent gap between the political attitudes, ideological positions, partisan affiliations, and policy preferences of white and black Americans. Using statistical analysis of national survey data, researchers have repeatedly shown that African Americans perceive and exist in a political world very different from that of whites. The results of this study demonstrate that political attitudes about Katrina were similarly divided by race.

Table 1: Racial Differences in Opinions about War, Hurricane and Race

	%Black	% White	Difference
Opinions about Iraq War			
Approve of Decision to go to war	39	66	37
Disapprove of Current Conduct of war	74	51	37
Protesting the war is unpatriotic	17	45	28
Opinions about Hurricane Katrina			
Federal Government. should spend whatever's necessary to rebuild and restore people to their homes in Katrina's aftermath	79	33	46
Kanye West's comments were unjustified	9	56	47
People Trapped didn't have resources vs. too stubborn (figure given didn't have resources)	89	57	32
Federal Gov. response faster if victims had been white	84	20	64
Katrina shows there's a lesson to be learned about continued racial inequality	90	38	52
Opinions about U.S. Racial Issues			
Racial equality in U.S. never achieved or at least not in respondent's lifetime	78	34	44
Federal Government should apologize for slavery	79	17	62
Support Reparations for Slavery	71	3	68
Support Apology for Jim Crow	90	29	71
Support Reparations for Jim Crow	74	5	69
Reparations for victims survivors Tulsa/Rosewood	84	7	77

Media Framing

Many praised America's broadcast and print media for courageous coverage of the New Orleans disaster. Others criticized the content of early media reports, particularly the use of the term refugee to describe the predominately black victims of the storm's aftermath. The researchers included an embedded experimental in the survey to test the effect of various frames on the willingness of respondents to support efforts to rebuild New Orleans.

All respondents to the survey were assigned to one of four versions of a media frame.

VERSION 1, Black Family, "refugee"



More than 10,000 refugees were displaced from their homes as a result of the Katrina disaster.

VERSION 2, Black Family, "American"



More than 10,000 Americans were displaced from their homes as a result of the Katrina disaster.

VERSION 3, White family “refugee”



More than 10,000 refugees were displaced from their homes as a result of the Katrina disaster.

VERSION 4, White family, “American”



More than 10,000 Americans were displaced from their homes as a result of the Katrina disaster.

After being shown one of these four versions of the media frame, each respondent was asked to choose one of the two options below.

- (1) The federal government should spend whatever is necessary to rebuild the city and to restore these refugees/Americans to their homes.
- or
- (2) Although this is a great tragedy the federal government must not commit too many funds to rebuilding until we know how we will pay for it.

Results.

1. Regardless of the frame they are given black respondents are much more likely than whites to report that the federal government should spend whatever necessary'. This is consistent across all experimental conditions. 76% of black respondents answered affirmatively while only 33% of white respondents did so. Race is a significant predictor even if one controls for basic demographic variables such as age, gender, and education.
2. Blacks are more likely to answer the question affirmatively if they are shown the black family image than the white family image. This effect of the images does not seem to depend whether the wording is refugee or American.
3. For white respondents, there is an interaction between race and wording. If white respondents are shown the white family image, they are on average 3% more likely to believe that the federal government should spend whatever is necessary. Wording makes no difference among the white family images. However, White respondents with the white family image and the "refugee" wording are on average 6% more likely to answer the question affirmatively than those with black mother image and the "refugee" wording.
4. Although the total magnitude of the effect is small, there is a statistically significant impact on white attitudes. White respondents who are exposed to the media frame pairing a black family with the description "refugee" are less likely to believe that the federal government should spend whatever is necessary to rebuild the city and restore the victims. This result suggest that the dominant frame of early reports, which showed African American victims and referred to them as refugees may have reduced the political will among white Americans to hold the federal government responsible for rebuilding.

Interviews with New Orleans Residents Affected by the Disaster

Professor Harris-Lacewell visited New Orleans November 11-17, 2005, and conducted approximately two dozen interviews with citizens of New Orleans who were affected by the storm, but who had returned to New Orleans. Several themes emerged in the interviews with New Orleans citizens.

1. Nearly all African American respondents expressed a belief that the government actively destroyed the levees in an attempt to save the rest of the city or they believe that on-going corruption in local government sustained inadequate levees in black and poor areas in the city. There was a nearly universal belief that the local government was willing to destroy the lives and property of black citizens in order to profit or protect more valuable, whiter communities. This study does not attempt to adjudicate the accuracy of this claim. Instead we note this finding to suggest that there are real consequences for rebuilding and restoration when citizens sustain such a high level of racialized distrust.
2. While expressing a deep distrust for government, African American, adult victims of the disaster spoke very positively of their interaction with faith-based charitable organizations in the aftermath of the hurricane. Most black men and women remembered these often (though not exclusively) white, Christian volunteers in cities like Houston, Baton Rouge, and Tulsa as kind, responsive and consistent. Federal bureaucracies such as SBA and FEMA were characterized as cruel, uncaring and incompetent. While they remember these volunteers with fondness these interactions did not necessarily lead to shared perceptions of the political and racial implications of the disaster.
3. The emotional and psychological trauma of the experience was palpable for most respondents. Most respondents openly acknowledged that their grief and loss significantly influenced their opinions about what constitutes a fair restoration and rebuilding plan.

For more information about the research and results please contact

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