



AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM 1998 AND 2009

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African Americans are more likely than whites to expect that Social Security will be their major source of income during retirement. This was true in both 1998 (35 percent of African Americans versus 17 percent of whites) and 2009 (37 percent of African Americans versus 27 percent of whites). African Americans also are more likely than whites to support the Social Security system as currently structured and to believe that the system should continue to provide the same type and level of benefits. A range of views, however, is held by African Americans and whites on selected proposals for reforming the Social Security system to ensure its solvency.

These findings are from a survey of 850 African Americans and 850 members of the general U.S. population (including 721 white Americans) that was conducted for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies by Research America between May 21 and June 9, 2009. The *Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies National Opinion Poll about Social Security, Retirement Savings and the Economic Downturn* found many striking differences between African Americans and whites on these topics.

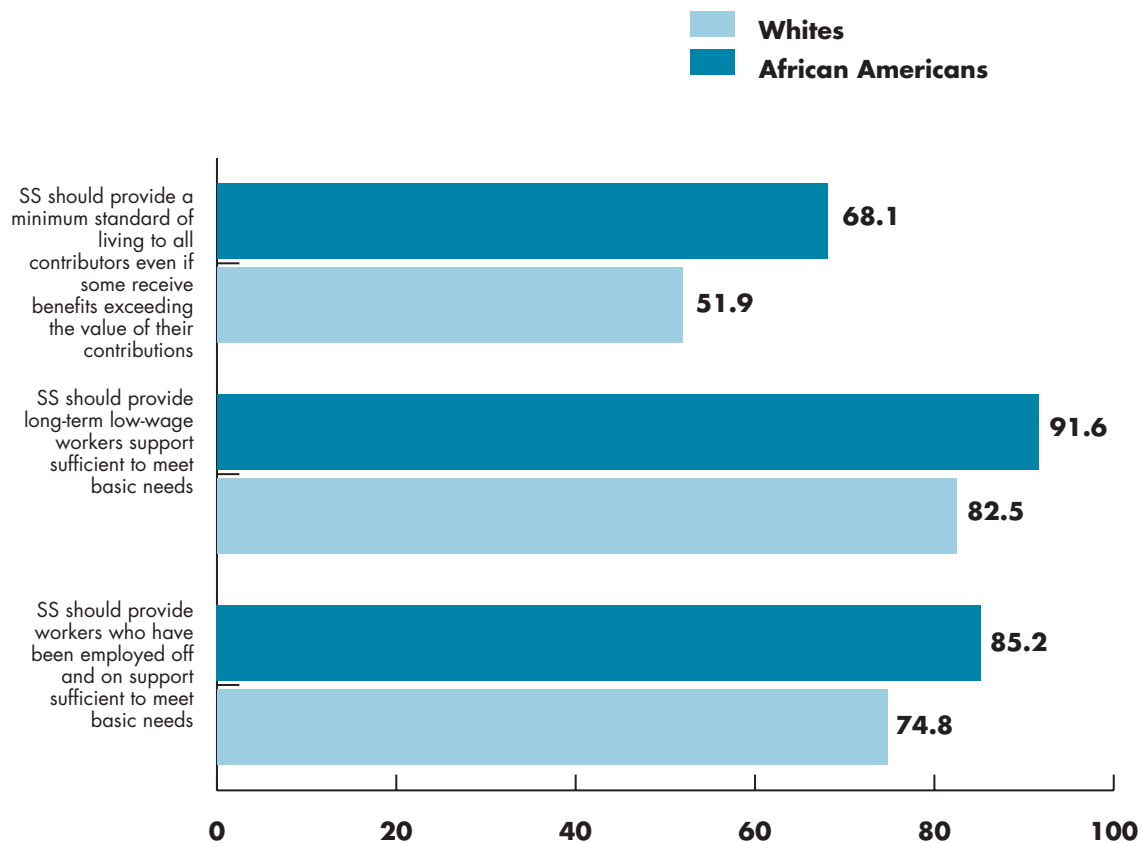
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PROGRAM BENEFITS AND EXPECTATIONS

African Americans are more likely than whites to believe that the current coverage and benefit levels of the Social Security program should be and will be retained.

- African Americans are more likely than whites to believe that the Social Security system should ensure a minimum standard of living for all contributors, even if some receive benefits exceeding the value of their contributions. In 1998*, almost two-thirds of African Americans (66 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with this belief, compared to three-fifths of whites (60 percent). In 2009, an even larger share (68 percent) of African Americans—in contrast to a smaller share of whites (52 percent)—held this view. [Figure 1]

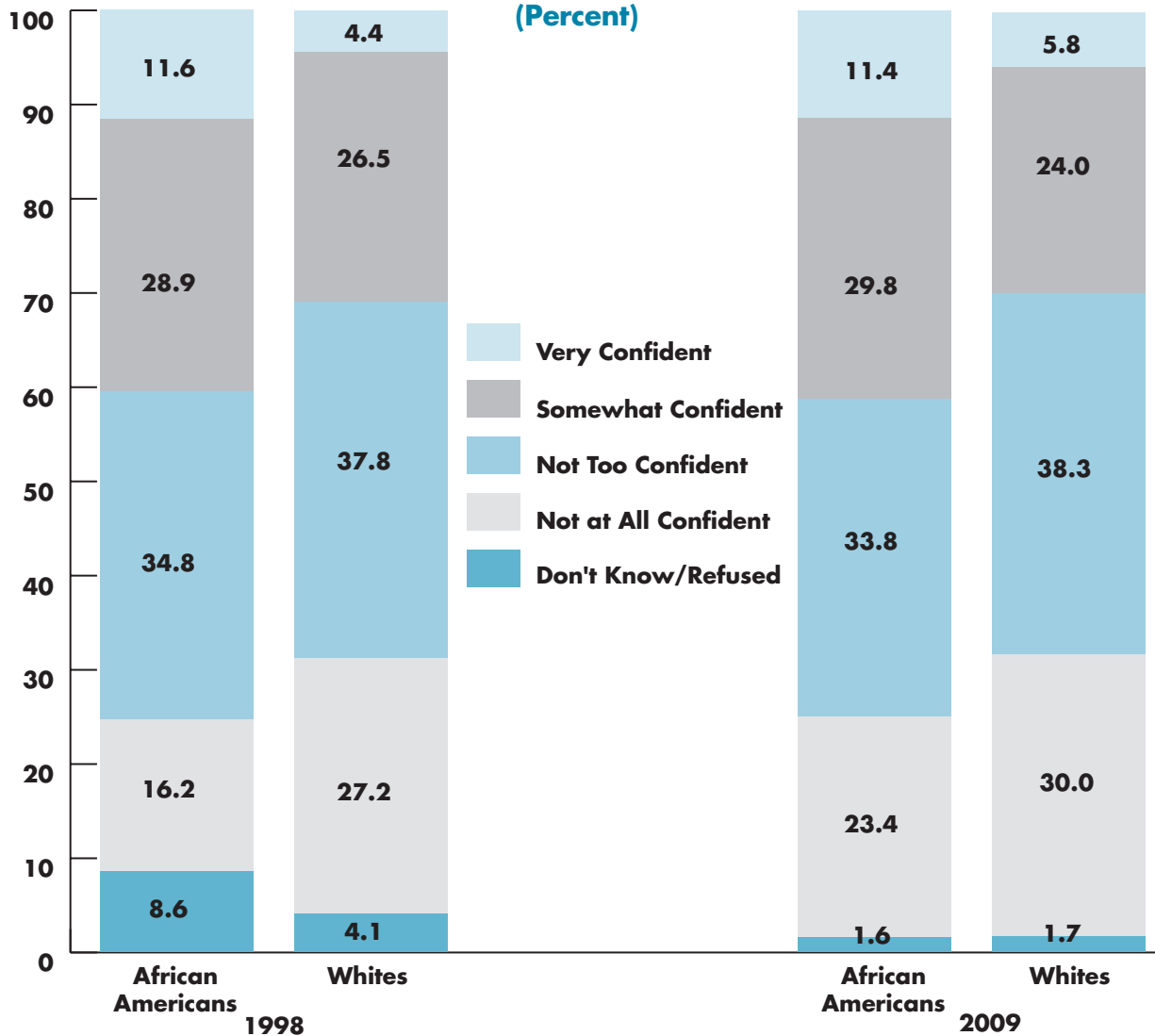
Figure 1
Opinions on Obligations of Social Security to Provide a Level of Support to Meet the Basic Needs of Contributors, African Americans and Whites, 2009
(Percent)



2009 Joint Center Poll

* Data are from the 1998 *Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies National Opinion Poll: Social Security*, conducted between September 5 and 27 that year.

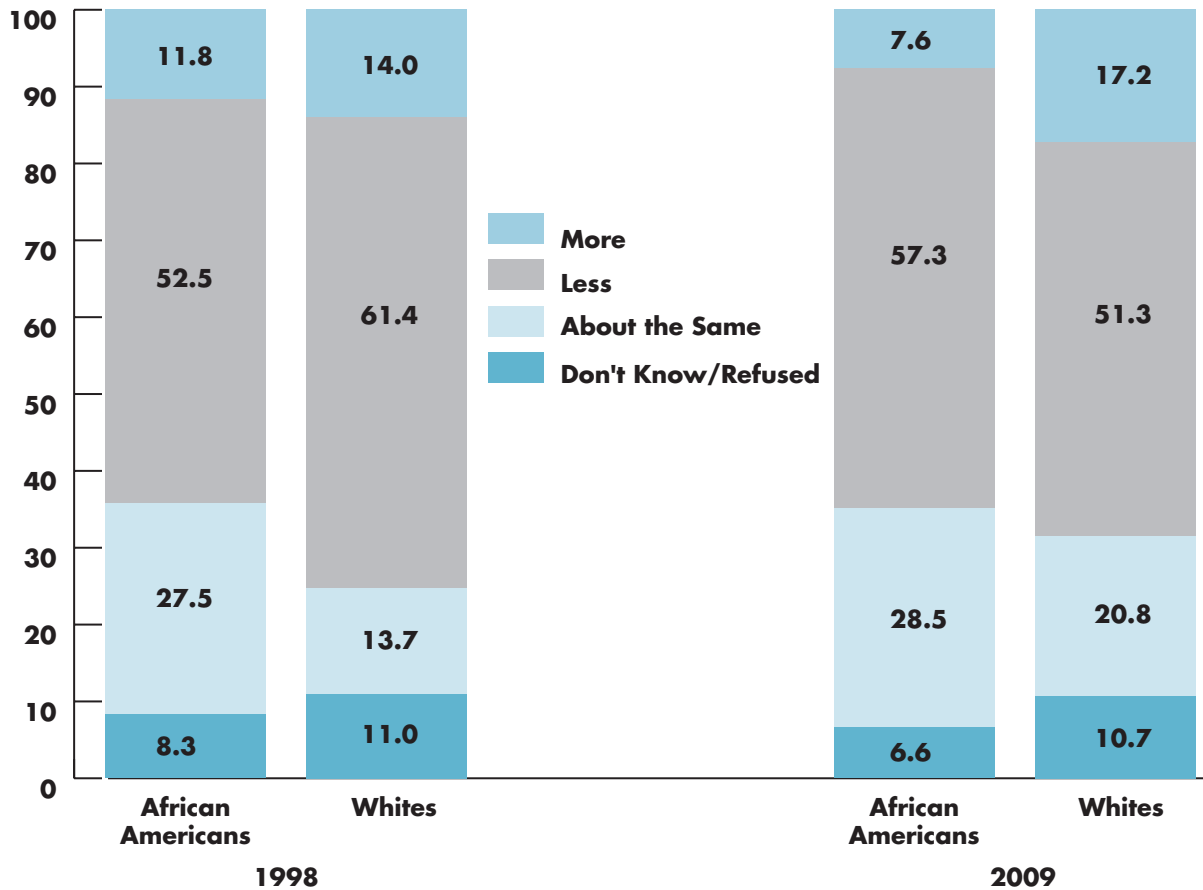
Figure 2
Confidence that Social Security will Continue to Provide Benefits of Equal Value to the Benefits Received by Retirees Today, African Americans and Whites, 1998 and 2009
(Percent)



1998 and 2009 Joint Center Polls

- Over the 1998-2009 period, African Americans also have remained more confident than whites that Social Security will continue to provide benefits of equal value to the benefits received by today's retirees. More than two of every five African Americans (41 percent) were either very confident or somewhat confident of this in 1998, while only 31 percent of whites shared this view. A gap of similar magnitude was evident in 2009. [Figure 2]
- Although African Americans are more likely than whites to believe that Social Security will continue to provide benefits of equal value to benefits received by today's retirees, a majority of both African Americans

Figure 3
Expectation of Return from Social Security Taxes,
African Americans and Whites, 1998 and 2009
(Percent)



1998 and 2009 Joint Center Polls

and whites in 1998 and 2009 expect that they personally will get less back from the system than they have paid into it. In 1998, more than three of every five whites (61 percent) and more than half of African Americans (53 percent) held this view. In 2009, though, African Americans (57 percent) were more likely than whites (51 percent) to believe they will get back less than they have paid into the system. [Figure 3]

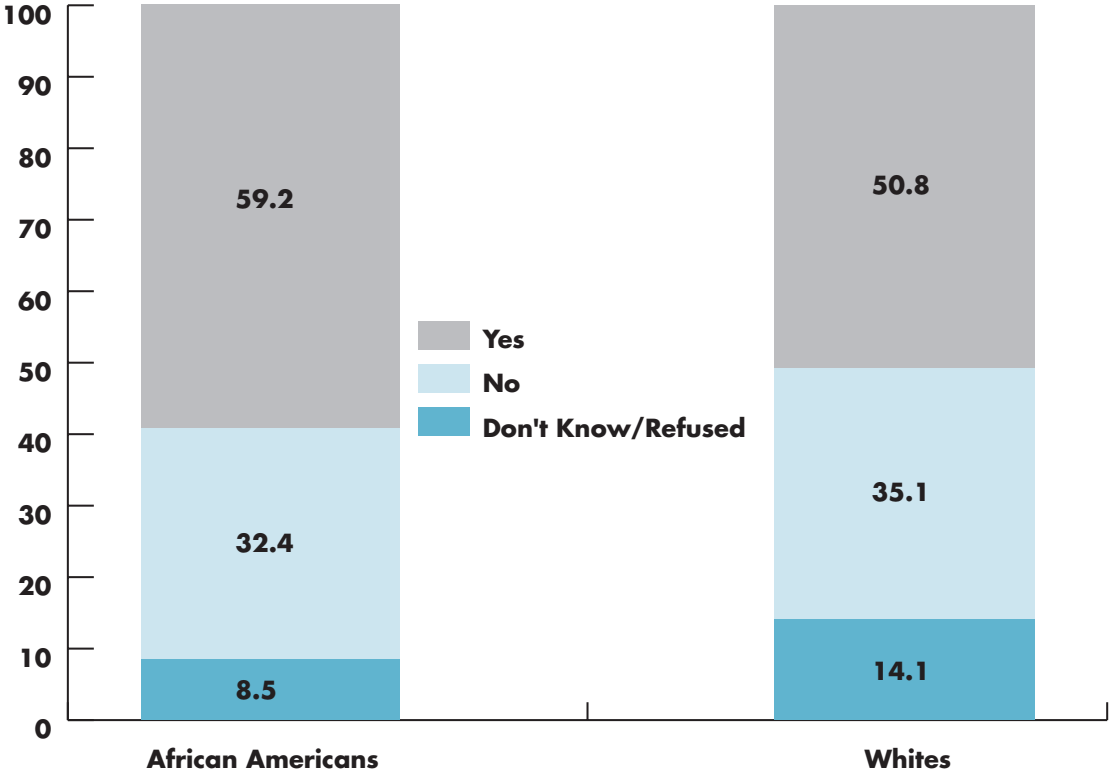
- African Americans are more likely than whites to believe that Social Security should provide a level of support to enable lifetime low-wage workers to meet their basic needs (2009). More than nine of every 10 African Americans (92 percent), but 83 percent of whites, think that Social Security should provide this level of support to long-term, minimum-wage workers. In addition, an 85 percent majority of African Americans and a 75 percent majority of whites think that Social Security should provide a level of support to enable persons who have worked intermittently throughout their careers to meet their basic needs during retirement. [Figure 1]

OPTIONS TO ENSURE SYSTEM SOLVENCY

To enable the Social Security system to provide benefits for future generations, numerous proposals have been put forth. While African Americans and whites are in accord on some of the options considered to enhance the solvency of the system, they hold differing views of other options.

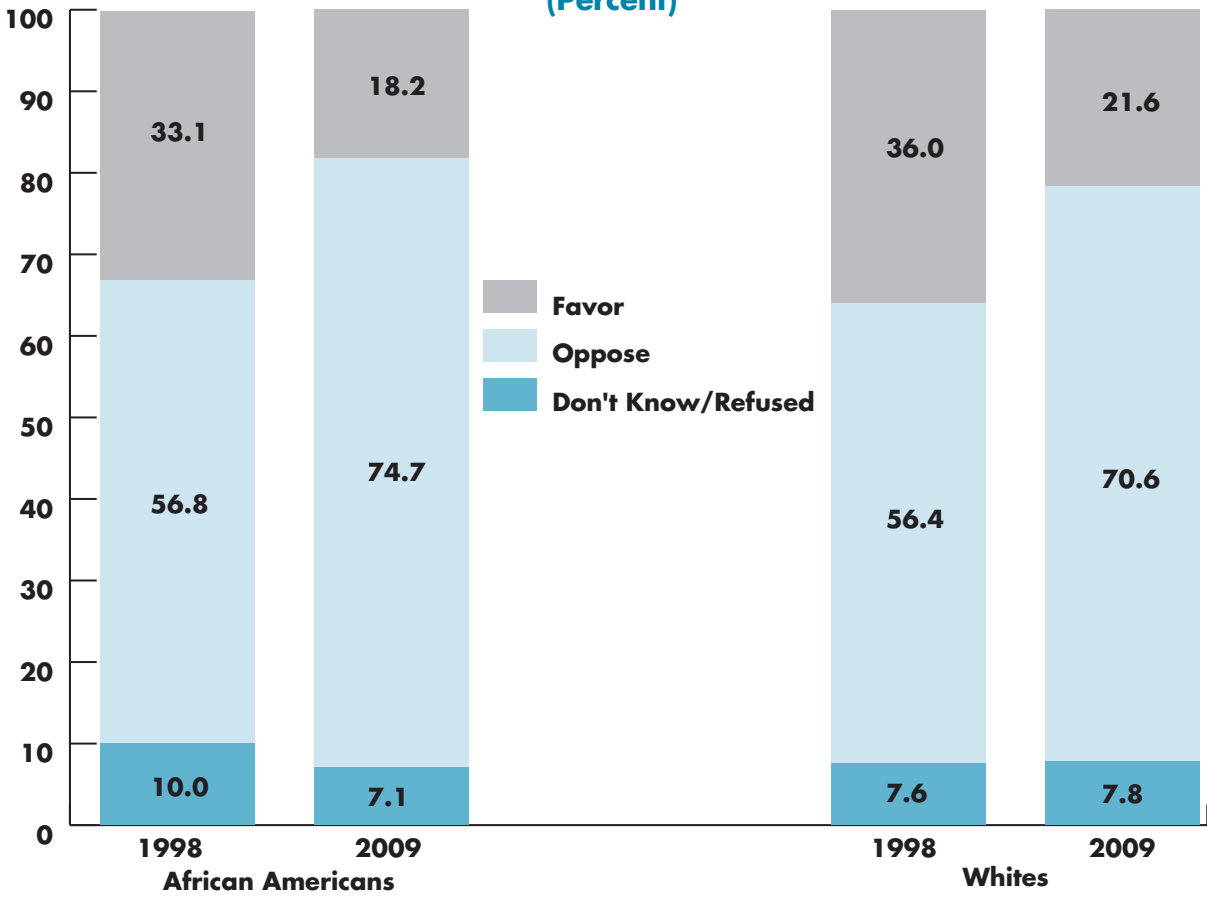
- African Americans are more likely than whites to think that the level of Social Security benefits should be means tested. (If Social Security benefits were means tested, the level of benefits would be linked to the amount of a beneficiary’s pre-retirement income.) Nearly three of every five African Americans (59 percent) but only half of whites (51 percent) favor means testing of Social Security benefits. About a third of each group (African Americans at 32 percent and whites at 35 percent) does not think Social Security benefits should be means tested. [Figure 4]
- Government investment of assets from the Social Security Trust Fund in private equities was opposed and favored by roughly equal shares of African Americans and whites in 1998. About 56 percent of both groups

Figure 4
Whether Social Security Should Be Means Tested,
African Americans and Whites, 2009
(Percent)



2009 Joint Center Poll

Figure 5
Views of Federal Government Investing Social Security Assets in Private Equities,
African Americans and Whites, 1998 and 2009
(Percent)

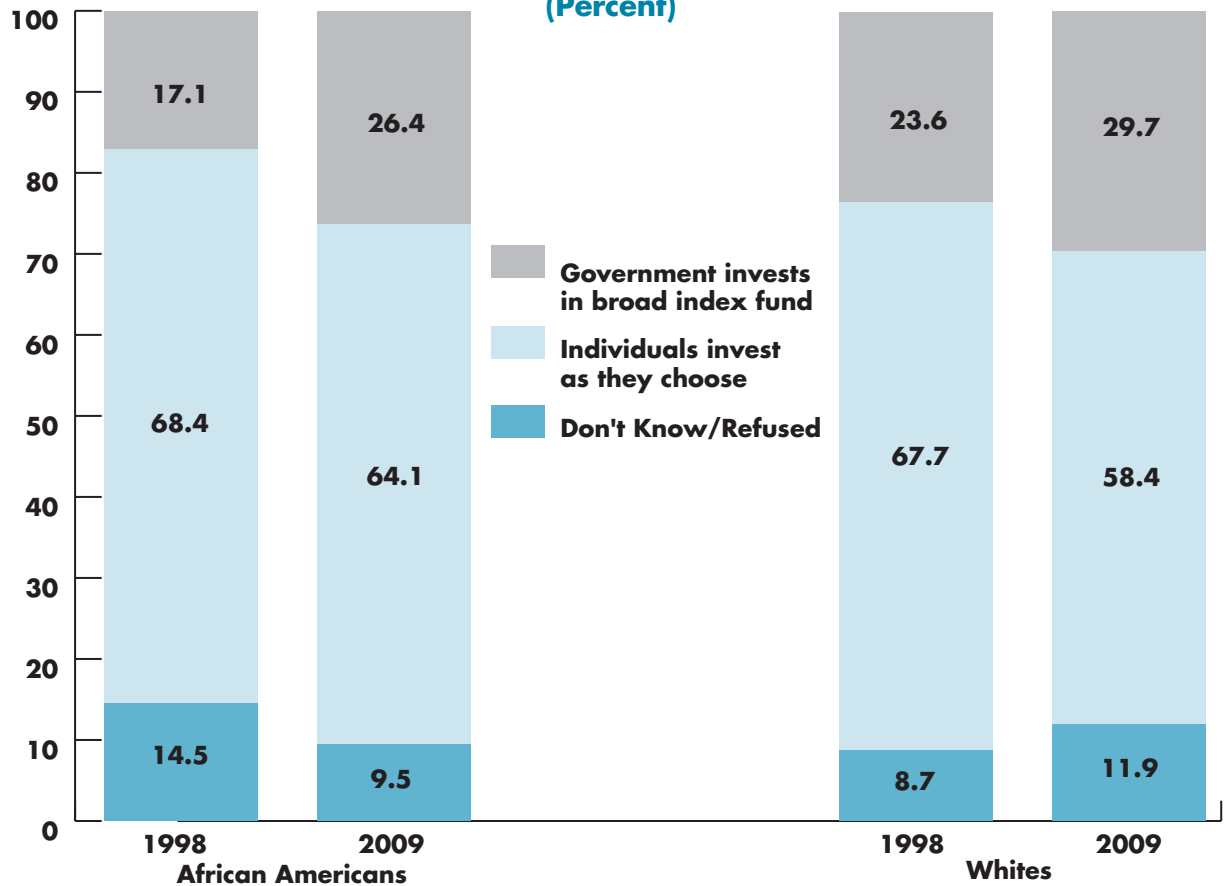


1998 and 2009 Joint Center Polls

opposed this form of investment, while about a third favored it. By 2009, after the economic downturn and the drop in stock values, the shares of both groups opposing private equity investments had increased—to 75 percent of African Americans and 71 percent of whites. At that time, smaller shares of both groups—18 percent of African Americans and 22 percent of whites—favored private equity investment by the government. [Figure 5]

- When comparing the preference for government investment in an index fund to that for individual investment in private equities of their choice, a shift in views was noted for both African Americans and whites between 1998 and 2009. More than two thirds of African Americans and whites (68 percent each) preferred individual investment in 1998. These majorities had fallen, however, to 64 percent of African Americans and 58 percent of whites in 2009. The proportions of each group who favored government investment in a broad index fund rose between 1998 and 2009—from one of every six (17 percent) to more than one of every four (26 percent) African Americans, and from nearly one of every four (24 percent) to 30 percent of whites. [Figure 6]

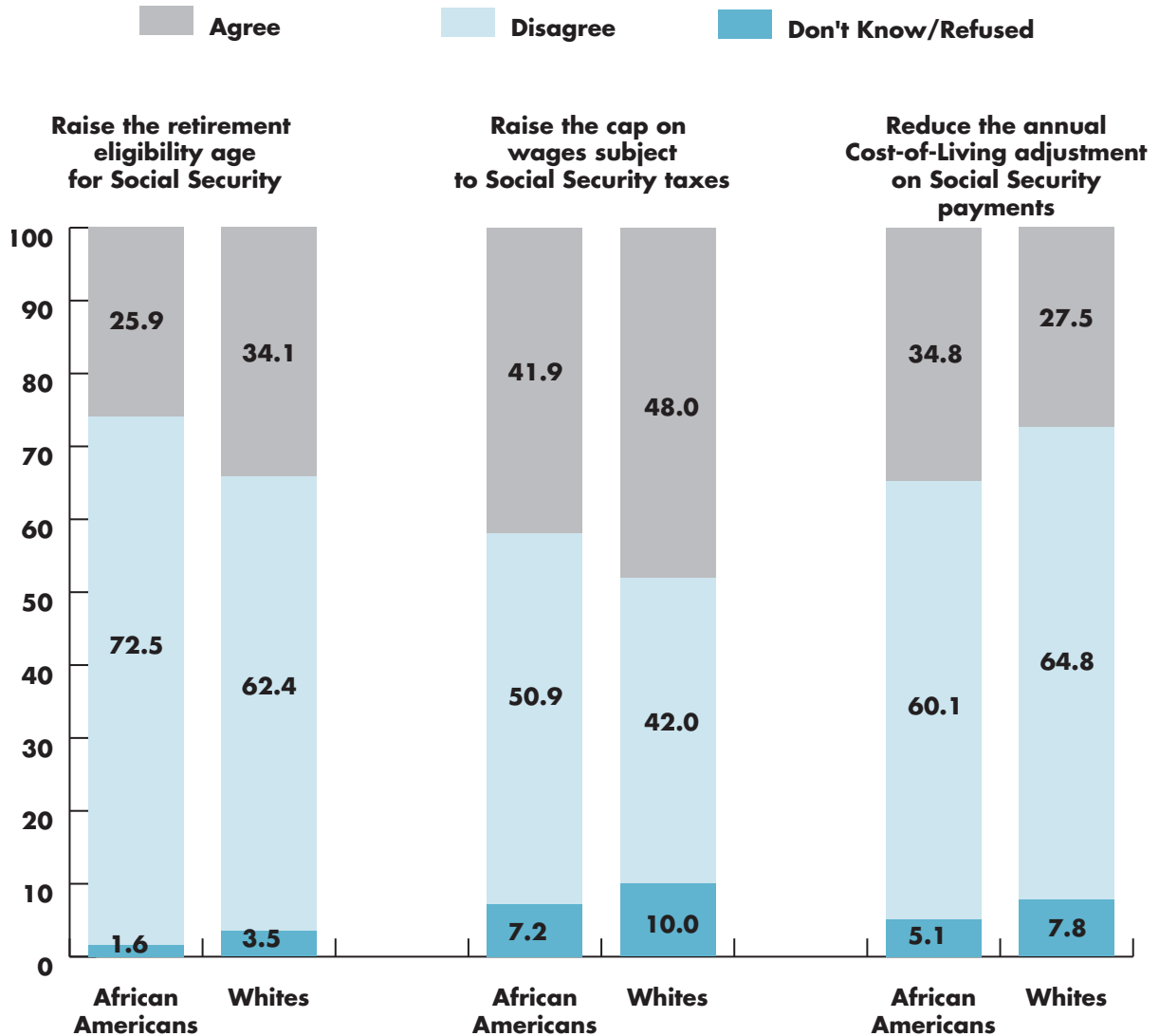
Figure 6
Views of Government Investment in Broad Index Fund and Allowing Individuals to Invest as They Choose, African Americans and Whites, 1998 and 2009 (Percent)



1998 and 2009 Joint Center Polls

- African Americans strongly dislike proposals to raise the Social Security retirement eligibility age. In 2009, nearly three-fourths of African Americans (73 percent) disagreed with proposals to foster solvency by raising the retirement age, with about a fourth favoring this approach. Five of every eight white persons (63 percent) opposed this proposal, and about a third (34 percent) favored it. [Figure 7]
- Fostering solvency by raising the cap on the level of wages taxed to support the Social Security system is favored by more whites (nearly half—48 percent) than African Americans (42 percent). More than half of African Americans (51 percent)—compared to about two-fifths of whites (42 percent)—disagree with raising the wage cap to foster solvency. [Figure 7]
- Reducing the annual cost-of-living adjustment on Social Security benefits to foster solvency is favored by more African Americans (35 percent) than whites (28 percent). [Figure 7]

Figure 7
Opinions on Proposals to Foster Social Security Solvency,
African Americans and Whites, 2009
(Percent)



2009 Joint Center Poll

This is one of three briefs created from the findings of the 2009 *Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies National Opinion Poll about Social Security, Retirement Savings and the Economic Downturn*. The other two briefs are entitled: “Retirement Savings Behavior and Expectations of African Americans: 1998 and 2009” and “The 2008-2009 Economic Downturn: Perspectives of African Americans.” All the briefs may be downloaded from the website of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (www.jointcenter.org). **The poll and these briefs were made possible with generous support from the Ford Foundation.**