

# **The 2014 Election in Aiken County: Confidence in the Federal Government To Handle an Ebola Outbreak**

A Public Service Report  
The USC Aiken Social Science and Business Research Lab  
Robert E. Botsch, Director

All conclusions in this report are solely those of the author and do not represent any position or opinion of the University of South Carolina Aiken.

Questions about this report should be directed to Robert E. Botsch, who can be reached at [bobb@usca.edu](mailto:bobb@usca.edu). Reports from previous surveys may be seen on-line at: <http://www.usca.edu/polisci/SSBRLab/>.

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In the fall of 2014 an outbreak of Ebola hit a number of African countries, triggering fear around the world. The United States was no exception to this fear despite assurances by national authorities. Fear spread in October after one Liberian citizen, Thomas Duncan, came to the U.S. carrying the disease. Duncan was initially misdiagnosed at a Dallas hospital and sent home. After coming down with full blown symptoms, he was admitted to the same hospital, where he died on October 8. Two nurses contracted the disease while treating Duncan. Both survived. They were the only two people to contract the disease on U.S. soil. As medical workers fighting the disease in Africa returned to the U.S., public fears led to attempts to forcibly quarantine those who had no symptoms, even though the disease is not communicable until symptoms appear and even then relatively hard to spread compared to diseases such as the flu. Other medical workers who had contracted the disease were brought to the U.S. for

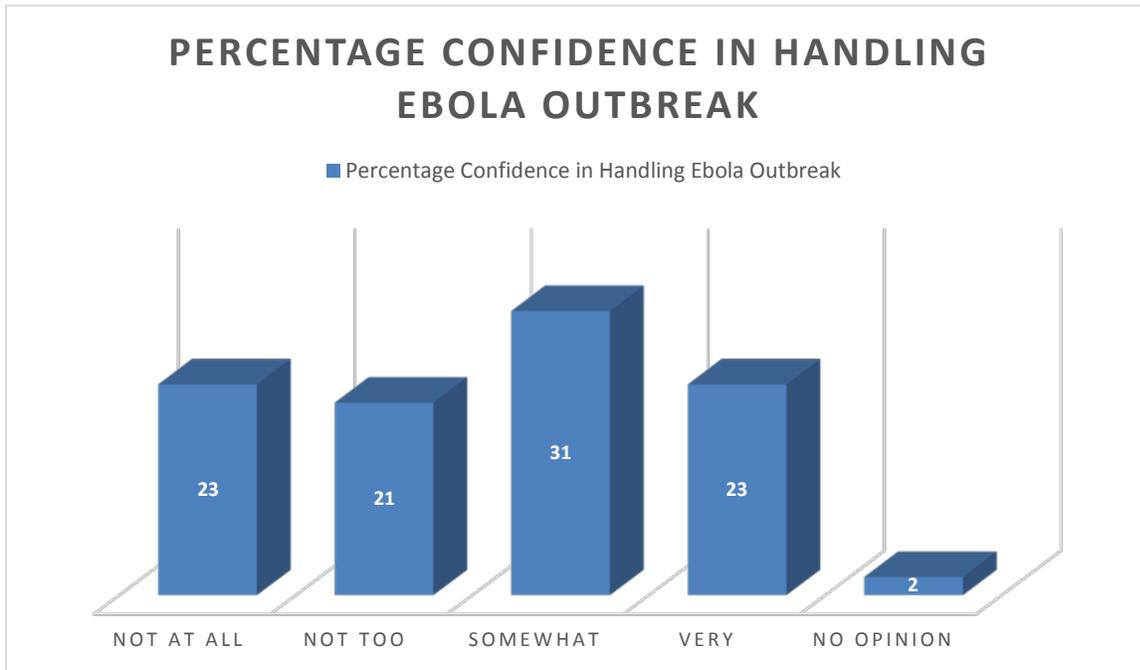
treatment. All survived except one doctor who arrived on November 15 with advanced symptoms, too late to save. He died two days later.

By the middle of October, Ebola was the most talked about topic in the news. A study by Media Matters reported in the *Huffington Post* counted 1,000 stories about Ebola on cable and evening television news programs (see [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/19/ebola-midterms-cable-news-coverage-changed-after-midterms\\_n\\_6185146.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/19/ebola-midterms-cable-news-coverage-changed-after-midterms_n_6185146.html)) in the four weeks prior to the November election. Survey questions focusing on Ebola were in the news on almost a daily basis. The website PollingReport.com lists about 25 separate surveys pertaining to Ebola in the month of October and early November (see <http://www.pollingreport.com/health.htm>).

Confidence in the federal government's ability to deal with this disease was an important factor in alleviating public fear. The Gallup Poll ran a question three times in October (on October 4-5<sup>th</sup>, 11-12<sup>th</sup>, and 18-19<sup>th</sup>) that tapped confidence in the federal government with respect to Ebola. They asked: "How confident are you that the federal government will be able to handle an outbreak of the Ebola virus in this country: very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not confident at all." As stories and rumors spread about the disease across the commercial and social media, public confidence fell. Those who were "very confident" in the Gallup polls dropped from 26% to 19% and those who were "not confident at all" increased from 17% to 24%.

The 2014 USC Aiken/Aiken Standard Exit Poll asked the same question on Election Day, November 4, just over two weeks after the last Gallup Poll on the question.

**Figure 1. Aiken County Divided on National Government Handling Ebola**



Voters in Aiken County almost perfectly matched the opinions of citizens across the nation on this question. Answers were spread fairly evenly across the spectrum for both samples. The biggest difference was that Aiken County voters were slightly more likely to feel “very” confident (by 4 percentage points), but that difference and all others were not large enough to be statistically significant.

**Table 1. Aiken County Voters Match the Nation in Confidence**

How Confident?	Not at All	Not Too	Somewhat	Very	No Opinion
<b>Nation (Gallup)</b>	24%	22%	33%	19%	2%
<b>Aiken County Voters</b>	23%	21%	31%	23%	2%

To simplify the analysis, we collapsed the four possible answers into two groups, those who chose the more confident responses and those who chose the less confident responses. Both nationally and among Aiken County voters, slight majorities were on the more confident side. The “somewhat” and “very” confident groups totaled 52% for the nation and 54% for Aiken. At the other end, those who were “not too” or “not at all” confident comprised 46% of citizens across the nation and 44% of Aiken County voters. Only 2% had no opinion in the county and across the nation.

**Table 2. Slight Majorities in Aiken County and Nation Are Confident**

<b>How Confident?</b>	<b>Not at All or Not Too</b>	<b>Somewhat or Very</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>
<b>Nation (Gallup)</b>	46%	52%	2%
<b>Aiken County Voters</b>	44%	54%	2%

Who had the most and least confidence in the federal government’s ability to handle any Ebola outbreak? We would suspect that those with higher education levels would be less liable to believe fear-based stories and more likely to be aware of and understand well-established medical evidence about the low risks of a significant outbreak.

**Table 3. Education Raises Confidence**

<b>Education:</b>	<b>HS or less</b>	<b>1-3 Yrs College</b>	<b>College Degree</b>	<b>Post Graduate</b>
<b>Lower Confid*</b>	53%	50%	44%	36%
<b>Higher Confid**</b>	47%	51%	56%	64%

Notes: \* “Lower Confidence” includes those who answered “not at all” or “not too” confident.

\*\* “Higher Confidence” includes those who answered “somewhat” or “very” confident.

Education was positively and significantly related to confidence in the federal government’s ability to handle an Ebola outbreak. As education rose, the percentage of

those who were “very” or “somewhat” confident rose. Only those with a high school degree or less showed a majority who were “not too” or “not at all” confident.

We also might suspect that those embracing ideological and partisan ties that generally distrust the national government would have less confidence in any specific situation such as handling an Ebola epidemic. This proved to be the case. In fact, ideology proved more explanatory than education. The relationship was significant and strong. Clear majorities of liberals and moderates said they were “very” or “somewhat” confident, while a clear majority of conservatives said they were “not too” or “not at all” confident.

**Table 4. Liberals More Confident, Conservatives Less Confident**

<b>Ideology:</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Conservative</b>
<b>Lower Confid*</b>	18%	40%	58%
<b>Higher Confid**</b>	82%	61%	42%

Notes: \* “Lower Confidence” includes those who answered “not at all” or “not too” confident.

\*\* “Higher Confidence” includes those who answered “somewhat” or “very” confident.

Because partisan identification is so strongly related to ideology, we found a similar relationship between partisanship and confidence. The only group in which a clear majority was on the lower half of the confidence scale was Tea Party supporters, most of whom were Republicans. More than two in three voters in this group said they were “not too” or “not at all” confident.

We looked at a range of demographic variables. Because women tend to see government playing a more helping role than men, we thought that women might be more confident than men about the role of the federal government in handling Ebola. But gender made little difference. While women seemed slightly more likely to be confident than men, the difference was not statistically significant.

However, other demographic variables, age, ethnicity, and regional identification, did make significant differences. Those over 65 years old were the least confident

group (54% “not too” or “not at all” confident). Those 35 or younger were the most confident (66% “very or “somewhat” confident). Whites were evenly divided on either side while nearly three-fourths of blacks were on the more confident side. Three-fourths of those who considered themselves to be “non-southerners” were on the more confident side while “native southerners” were evenly split.

We should note that age, ethnicity, and regional identification are all strongly related to partisanship and ideology, because older white native southerners are those most likely to identify as conservative Republicans, and they are also more likely to support the Tea Party. So we should not be surprised that older white native southerners had little confidence in the federal government’s ability to handle any Ebola outbreak.

If we arrange all these groups by levels of general confidence from highest to lowest, we see that the groups with highest confidence are the groups that tend to share a preference for greater involvement by the national government in addressing problems (liberals, Democrats, non-southerners, blacks, the young, and those with education beyond a four year college degree). At the other extreme are groups that prefer private voluntary actions in dealing with problems (Tea Party supporters, conservatives, Republicans, the elderly, native southerners, whites, and those with lower levels of education).

Looking at the data slightly differently, if for each group we subtract the percentage with lower confidence from the percentage with higher confidence, we get the “confidence percentage point gap” for each group. Positive gaps are for groups that are more confident and negative gaps are for groups that are less confident. Comparing the positive gaps for the most confident groups, liberals and Democrats, with the groups that were the least confident, Tea Party Supporters, conservatives and Republicans, we see how far apart the two parties and their ideologies are today in feelings of confidence in the national government. Liberals are 64 percentage points to the positive side and Tea Party supporters are 38 points to the negative side.

**Table 4. Groups in Order of Decreasing Confidence**

	<b>Higher Confidence*</b>	<b>Lower Confidence**</b>	<b>Higher – Lower % Point Gap</b>
<b>Liberals</b>	82%	18%	+64
<b>Democrats</b>	82%	18%	+64
<b>Non-Southerners</b>	76%	24%	+52
<b>Blacks</b>	74%	26%	+48
<b>Age: 18-35</b>	66%	34%	+34
<b>Education: Col +</b>	64%	36%	+28
<b>Moderates</b>	61%	40%	+21
<b>Education: College Deg</b>	56%	44%	+12
<b>Converted Southerners</b>	55%	45%	+10
<b>ALL AIKEN COUNTY</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>+10</b>
<b>Age: 36-65</b>	55%	46%	+9
<b>Non-Tea Party Repub</b>	53%	47%	+6
<b>Independents</b>	51%	49%	+2
<b>Education: 1-3 yrs col</b>	51%	50%	+1
<b>Whites</b>	50%	50%	0
<b>Native Southerners</b>	50%	50%	0
<b>Education: HS or less</b>	47%	53%	-6
<b>Age: 66 &amp; up</b>	46%	54%	-8
<b>All Republicans</b>	44%	56%	-12
<b>Conservatives</b>	42%	58%	-16
<b>Tea Party Supporters</b>	31%	69%	-38

Notes: \* “Higher Confidence” includes those who answered “somewhat” or “very” confident.

\*\* “Lower Confidence” includes those who answered “not at all” or “not too” confident.

In a healthy democratic republic, a delicate balance exists between confidence in government to handle crises and skepticism about government performance. On the one hand, for government to successfully handle emergencies, citizens must have a certain level of confidence. Citizens are far more likely to heed warnings and take

needed actions if they feel confident that the government knows what it is doing. If citizens lack confidence, they may make unreasonable demands or take unwarranted actions on their own. On the other hand, some healthy skepticism and criticism encourages oversight and improvement in government performance. For example, the heavy criticism of government performance in the initial rollout of the Affordable Care Act led to improved performance in the ability of people to sign up for health insurance later. Review of the poor performance in responding to Hurricane Katrina helped the government improve its performance in responding to Hurricane Sandy.

In the case of Ebola, lack of confidence in government did exact a price on the nation's response. Citizens demanded unwarranted quarantines of those who returned from fighting the disease in African nations and even pressured local officials to close down some schools based on irrational fears. Carried to the next step, such fears could cause significant economic disruptions, and even worsen the crisis by discouraging medical personnel from fighting the disease at its source. The lack of new cases in the United States ultimately calmed the rising tide of fear and reinforced the fact that Ebola was not very easily communicated, just as the Center for Communicable Diseases had originally advised. With improved medical protocols, no more medical personnel became infected in the U.S. while treating patients brought here for treatment. And patients brought here for treatment in the early stages of the disease were recovering. No new cases in the U.S. meant far fewer news stories—fears quickly abated.

News stories about governmental failures will almost always get far more coverage than government successes because the business model for private media depends on attracting an audience. Negative stories attract attention just as a “fender-bender” on the one side of an interstate causes drivers on the other side to slow to a crawl. Wise citizens need to pay more attention to successes and balance them out with the far more publicized failures. At this point at least, national government actions with respect to Ebola seem rather successful and should improve confidence in the federal government—if enough citizens are wise enough to pay attention.