Introduction

During the 2012 presidential election, television personality and host, Piers Morgan interviewed the late New Hampshire Governor John Sununu after the late Black Republican General, Colin Powell, gave his endorsement for President Obama's second term. In the interview, when asked about Powell's endorsement, Gov. Sununu stated, "[w]ell, I think that when you have somebody of your own race that you're proud of being President of the United States—I applaud Colin for standing with [President Obama]" (Madison 2012). Later, conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly, invoked a similar belief about why Black voters supported Obama, saying, "[t]he reason—one of the reasons Barack Obama won was because African Americans voted for him to the tune of 93 or 94 percent … a lot of it, some of it, was because of his skin color."[1] Even famed actor Samuel L. Jackson affirmed this contention when he said, "I voted for Barack because he was [B]la—'Cuz that's why other folks vote for other people — because they look like them."[2] These quotes reflect a prevailing wisdom, not only about why Barack Obama was so successful in garnering such a high proportion of the Black electorate, but also about the role that race plays in how Black voters choose whom they want to represent them. Sununu, O'Reilly, and Jackson all seem to suggest that if a candidate is Black, Black people will vote for them.

To be fair, these expectations are not baseless given the strong support that Jesse Jackson received from Black voters in his 1984 and 1988 presidential bids (Manning 1984; Reed 1986; Tate 1991, 1994; Simien and Hampson 2020). Indeed, Obama's success with Black voters in both his election and reelection campaigns led to a large conversation about the role that race played

[1] www.mediamatters.org/fox-nation/bill-oreilly-african-americans-voted-obama-because-his-skin-color
[2] www.politico.com/blogs/click/2012/02/samuel-l-jackson-rants-about-obama-race-114201

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in the amount of Black support he received (Block 2011). There were numerous instances in which Black voters' electoral support of Obama was voiced by prominent individuals, and indeed some Black candidates were emboldened to make history nationally and at the state level in the afterglow of Obama's success with Black voters in 2008 and 2012.

The most apparent contemporary example of Obama's influence can be seen in the 2020 Presidential Democratic primary election. Kamala Harris and Cory Booker, two well-known Black politicians, announced their intentions to become the Democratic nominee in February of 2019.[3] Speculation grew amongst pundits about how this was going to affect the Black community, namely which of these two politicians would Black voters gravitate toward (Kaleem and Mason 2019). The news reports that came out about Black support assumed that either Booker or Harris's success with Black voters was inevitable, which they would come to realize would not be the case (Berman 2019; Grunwald et al. 2019).

The post–Obama era not only prompted the belief that Harris and Booker would garner strong amounts of the Black voter, but also made the possibility of them becoming the nominee feel more tangible. Moreover, the importance of the Black vote for Democratic nominees was thrown into sharp relief against the backdrop of Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, which was unable to achieve the same high turnout from Black voters that Obama received in the two previous general presidential elections. As such, the 2020 Democratic primary presented a recognition of the importance of the Black electorate for the success of Democratic politicians in the general election against Donald Trump.

One departure from the Obama campaign's tactics was the reliance on explicitly racialized rhetoric. In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the exponential rise in the anti-Asian violence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the continued conversation surrounding immigration, the United States was going through what some deemed a racial reckoning. This reality prompted politicians to speak about race more explicitly than had been the case in the past (Lockhart 2019). Indeed, during the Democratic primary debates most of the politicians discussed their beliefs about issues that disproportionately affected the Black community and made proclamations about reparations for the country's history of enslavement, the Black Lives Matter Movement to show solidarity, and discussed police reform at length (Joung et al. 2021).

Despite this rise in racialized rhetoric, the increased viability of Black candidates in the post–Obama era, at no point, during their respective runs, did Harris or Booker amass the expected strong support from Black Democratic

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[3] This is not the first time that the United States has had two Black candidates running against each other in a Democratic primary, but these are two candidates to run in the post-Obama era, which I posit creates a new context in which there is less doubt about their ability to become president.

voters (Herndon 2019). In line with the existing political science research on candidate viability, Harris and Booker were known and viable candidates with strong connections to the Black community. Booker was the former mayor of Newark, New Jersey, a predominantly Black city, who rose to fame after he defeated the popular incumbent mayor, Sharpe James (Gillespie 2010). Then, in 2013, he became the first Black Senator from New Jersey. Harris was born and raised in Oakland, California to an Indian mother and Jamaican father, and attended the prominent historically Black university, Howard University where she was a member of the historically Black Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. Both Harris and Book, often point to their parents' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as an important part of their understanding of the necessity of racial justice. Both politicians have been highly visible during their respective careers(Harris 2019; Saul 2019). Taken together, they were both well known within the political zeitgeist when they entered the 2020 Democratic primary and should have, according to the conventional wisdom surrounding Black candidate preference, fared well with Black voters. However, Black support for Joe Biden was consistently stronger than it was for either Harris or Booker, particularly among older Black voters (Igelnik et al. 2021).

The 2020 Democratic primary offered a different perspective because individuals, including Black voters, were very interested in selecting a candidate who they believed would beat the Republican incumbent, Donald Trump, in the general election. All these considerations played an important role in how candidates were chosen. But none of those considerations are included in the way that conventional wisdom and scholarship engage Black voter behavior or indeed, more identity-based candidate selection processes broadly construed. This book offers a theoretical framework through which we can truly better understand how these processes work for Black people with implications for how other marginalized political communities might approach candidate selection as well.

What could have led to the lack of support for Harris and Booker? By all accounts, they each had the necessary tools working in their favor to be strong contenders for the Black electorate's support. While it is difficult to isolate a single reason that they were unable to garner that support, what is clear is that their inability to galvanize Black voters played a large part in their inability to gain the nomination. Moreover, Harris and Booker's loss in addition to other Black politicians who failed to gain the projected Black support stands in the face of the assertions made by Governor Sununu, Bill O'Reilly, Samuel L. Jackson, and others about the role of race in how Black voters determine which political representative to choose. This example introduces the numerous questions this book seeks to address, chief among them being: What is happening under the hood of Black voters' political candidate selection process?

Often, when scholars have sought to answer this question, skin color has been the main explanation for what leads Black voters to support politicians,

but Harris and Booker's loss highlights the need to better understand what other considerations Black voters make when choosing potential representatives to support. Their loss makes it clear that keeping with the current scholarly trend of answering this question by looking at political elections where Black Democrat and White Republican candidates run against one another might be insufficient to effectively address the question of how Black voters arrive at which candidate they will support. To adequately predict how Black voters distinguish between, and ultimately choose, potential politicians, we must understand how they utilize race, beyond skin color, as a decision-making factor. Furthermore, it is imperative to determine whether these distinctions, if they exist at all, are solely applied to Black representatives or to any potential representative, regardless of their race, seeking to garner Black support.

In recent times, there have been meaningful strides made toward greater political inclusion of Black politicians in statewide and national office, not limited to having the first Black president, the first Black woman vice president, three Black governors, and several Black Democratic candidates who ran very strong races for the governorship in Southern states. In each of these elections, Black support has been high, but is that because these politicians look like Black voters or because they are Democrats? Or is it something else altogether? Understanding what motivates how Black voters make these choices both for co-racial and outgroup politicians is integral for the ability to predict how Black voters, a pivotal voting bloc in American politics, arrive at their choices both in primary and general elections. By making the context of the empirical tests one where both the partisanship and race of a politician, two of the chief explanations of Black candidate selection, are the same, I am better situated to isolate the mechanism that explains why Black voters choose certain candidates over others.

In this book, I tackle each of these tasks by taking a different approach to exploring Black voters' candidate selection process. I explore how Black individuals use the social aspects of their Black identity to assess a politician's ability to represent the Black community's political interest. I argue that Black voters expect politicians, regardless of their race, to prove a willingness to prioritize the needs of the racial group above the politician's prestige or personal interest. To make this dynamic clearer, I focus my empirical inquiry on how Black voters choose candidates in Democratic primary elections. In primary elections, Black voters have multiple Democratic candidates to choose from, but the race and partisanship of the candidates, particularly in majority Black districts where many Black voters live, are likely the same. This means that Black voters must use criteria other than skin color and partisanship to evaluate which candidate will be the best representative.

My goal in this book is to present a nuanced and well-developed assessment of Black voter candidate preferability and selection that highlights the sophistication and strategic manner in which Black voters operate when choosing

representatives. Existing work on Black voter preferences has pursued this question largely by examining Black voters' preference for Black representatives in contexts where a Black candidate is running against a White one (Tate 2004). However, this text brings a novel theoretically grounded and empirically tested framework into the discussion of Black voters' political considerations. The factors Black voters take into account when assessing Black candidates, as I will explain in the next section, are often discussed in terms of physical similarities, shared lived experiences, and policy positions. Unlike past studies, I argue that Black voters' preferences for political representatives rely less on whether the candidate is Black or White, and more on perceptions of a candidate's commitment to prioritizing the interests of the racial group over their own individual interests and potential prestige.

A second distinctive feature of this book is the integration of different kinds of strategies from representatives seeking to communicate their commitment to Black voters. Many studies assess the relationship between Black voters and representatives assuming a similarity in skin tones, which does not account for the variety of strategic signals politicians – Black and White – have at their disposal. My use of a novel large-scale survey experiment of approximately 4200 Black subjects allows me to address the question of how Black voters' perceptions of representatives are influenced by the way the representative uses certain signals to communicate their commitment.

The use of experiments allows for the establishment of important causal narratives about the role of race and history in Black political decision-making processes. Though inquiries into the role that race plays in choosing same-race candidates and numerous works have discussed the various personas or strategies Black representatives take on while campaigning, few have, to my knowledge, provided a theoretical framework to understand not only the strategies themselves, but their effect on Black voters' perceptions of politicians and those subsequent affective evaluations. It is here that this book deviates from existing research by providing a mechanism that explains not only how Black voters choose certain candidates but, more importantly, why.

The argument I will make at the end of this book is that, despite the development in Black political incorporation that many note has led Black people to rely more on mainstream political engagement rather than protest, Black voters seek out and prefer candidates whose sacrifices are reminiscent of Black leaders from the activist tradition. There are several reasons why this preference persists despite the strides made for Black political inclusion since the Civil Rights Movement. First, for many Black Americans, the Civil Rights Movement still serves as the pivotal moment for Black political engagement. The success of the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders offered Black individuals an entrance into the broader political arena after generations of being denied the right to vote or participate in formal politics. This win for Black Americans came because of the sacrifices made to ensure the racial group was included in the political process. From sit-ins to demonstrations, physical violence, and death

those who led the Civil Rights Movement were held in the highest regard amongst their fellow Black citizens (Canon 1999). This esteem assisted many in their political pursuits as many of the men and women entered formal political office themselves, bringing their protest mentality with them. Thus, many of the first Black political leaders were civil rights leaders and their methods of getting things done were viewed as an effective means of governance and representation of the Black community.

Second, before the Civil Rights Movement there existed a cultural understanding of cost and sacrifice for the sake of the group's progress. Black voters used social sanctions to ensure that racial group members, including their leaders, prioritized the group's social and political needs before their own (Walton 1985). Civil rights leaders embodied this racial group prioritization with their sacrifices for the sake of greater political inclusion. This notion of social accountability remains prevalent amongst many Black individuals today, informing their social and political behavior (White et al. 2014; White and Laird 2020; Wamble et al. 2022). Since many Black representatives of the Civil Rights era brought the same sense of prioritization into their formal positions, many Black individuals still recognize that representational style as integral to their ability to participate in politics and expect group prioritization not only from their fellow racial group members but anyone who seeks to represent them in political office.

Ultimately, I argue that Black voters' preferences for representation rest not simply on commonalities of skin color, nor assumptions of similarities in lived experiences, but on assessments of a candidate's commitment to setting their own ambition aside for the sake of bettering the racial group. This electoral expectation can be generalized to all representatives who seek to garner Black support. Providing a nuanced understanding of the mechanism that undergirds Black voters' expectations contributes significantly to the field of political science, the study of political representation, and Black politics. This is particularly true given the increase of racial appeals as candidates continue to recognize the influence in the Black electorate, and the growing recognition of Black voters as a powerful voting bloc within the Democratic Party.

OBAMA AND THE POST-RACIAL FALLACY

One of the main drivers that led many to expect contemporary Black politicians to be so successful in gaining the necessary support from Black voters is the conventional wisdom that Black voters vote for Black candidates no matter what. If we apply this logic to Harris and Booker's candidacies as a known, viable, and potentially historic choice, it is no surprise that many across the public and intellectual spheres assumed at least one of them would have success with Black voters. However, these brief examinations of their lack of triumph make it apparent that Obama's ability to secure Black support in the

presidential elections was more the exception than the rule. The role of race is clearly more complicated than conventional wisdom about Black voters' candidate preference would suggest.

Obama's success with Black voters – though historic on a number of dimensions – was not a foregone conclusion when he announced his candidacy in 2007. In fact, at the onset of his campaign, Black voters were more supportive of Hillary Clinton than Obama.[4] As time has gone on, there have been many explanations offered as to why his success with Black voters was not automatic – Clinton's popularity with Black voters because of her husband, Obama's purported lack of connection to the Black American experience, lack of name recognition, etc. (Dickerson 2007). Moreover, Hillary Clinton had support from prominent individuals within the Black community, such as the late civil rights icon John Lewis.[5] It is not my intention to provide an explanation for which one of these understandings is correct, but rather to point out that despite the historic nature of his candidacy and the shared race with Black voters, the resultant support Obama received was not automatic, despite his eventual success. Instead, Black voters' calculus of their support required more time and investigation. This is an important consideration because the oversimplification of Black people's selection of Obama has led to the belief about the relationship between race and representation that pervades both scholarly and public discourse today.

The flaw in the fallacy that Black voters prefer candidates solely based on physical similarity ignores the fact that race, as a social construct, contains both physical and social components. Obama and other candidates had to answer questions from Black voters about their social connections to the Black community, not their skin tone. Sociologist Michael Omi claims that "race is commonly and popularly defined in terms of biological traits—phenotypic differences in skin color, hair texture, and other physical attributes, often perceived as surface manifestations of deeper, underlying differences in intelligence, temperament, physical prowess, and sexuality" (Omi 2001; 243). It is the "deeper, underlying differences" within and across racial categorizations that are overlooked when the focus of the explanation of Black voter candidate support is on skin color alone. Even within the realm of skin color, literature tells us that there are social components and conclusions drawn by Black people based on one's skin color (Ransford 1970; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Allen et al. 2000; Ono 2002).

Even within the study of politics, new literature tells us that Black voters make determinations of candidates based on how light or dark their skin is (Burge et al. 2020). Thus, even the physical manifestations of one's Blackness have social implications that are leveraged by other Black people to make

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[4] www.pewresearch.org/2007/08/30/Black-enthusiasm-for-clinton-and-obama-leaves-little-room-for-edwards/

[5] https://rollcall.com/2007/10/12/clinton-adding-to-cbc-support/

determinations about the character of an individual and their connection to the racial group. An explanation centered on skin color does not explain why Obama's heritage and connection to the Black community was under such scrutiny when he ran for election and reelection. Comments were made by Dr. Ben Carson and Rev. Dr. Cornel West, among others, questioning if Obama was "really Black" (Capehart 2016).[6] Indeed, writer, Debra Dickerson wrote a piece about Obama's Blackness, saying,

[B]lacks fear that one day he'll go Tiger Woods on us and get all race transcendent (he might well have never been in the running without a traditionally [B]lack spouse and kids). Notwithstanding their silence on the subject, [B]lacks at the top are aware (and possibly troubled?) by Obama's lottery winnings: "[B]lack" but not [B]lack … To say that Obama isn't [B]lack is merely to say that, by virtue of his White American mom and his Kenyan dad – he is an American of African immigrant extraction … Since he had no part in our racial history, he is free of it. (Dickerson 2007)[7]

When the opportunity to discuss race arose in his campaign after comments made by his former pastor, Obama provided an explicitly racialized narrative for himself saying,

I am the son of a [B]lack man from Kenya and a White woman from Kansas … I am married to a [B]lack American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters … I can no more disown [Reverend Wright] than I can disown the [B]lack community. I can no more disown [Reverend Wright] than I can my White grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of [B]lack men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. (Obama 2008)[8]

In the critiques leveraged by Dickerson and others, and in Obama's own words about his racial identity, we see an emphasis placed, not on his skin color, but rather on his connection to and understanding of Blackness in the American context. This strong reliance on the underlying social aspects of one's racial identity invites us to consider more socially based mechanisms to explain how and why certain candidates get support from Black voters.

In short, Obama's candidacy and presidency are anomalous. The significance of his running for office and subsequent success cannot be overstated or undersold, particularly as it pertains to Black voters' turnout in both elections.

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[6] www.delawareonline.com/story/opinion/2016/02/23/ben-carson-and-cornel-west-actually-agree-obamas-not-Black-enough/80829618/

[7] www.salon.com/2007/01/22/obama_161/

[8] www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467

Once we think of his success as outside of the ordinary, we are better equipped to investigate more generalizable explanations of why candidates who tried to run similar campaigns failed. Obama's victory and scholarship's justifications for Black candidate success with co-racial voters suggest that candidates such as Anthony Brown, Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, Benjamin Jealous, Artur Davis, Deval Patrick, and others should have fared better with Black voters. However, if we recognize how unique Obama's election was relative to others, the need for better causal answers for the role that race plays in Black voter's candidate preference is more evident.

THE ROLE OF PARTISANSHIP

The premise of "vote for this politician because they are Black" is not simply a racial story; if it were, we would expect that Black Republicans would fare far better with the Black electorate than they have in recent elections. Black identity, and the social components therein, include political implications, such as identifying as Democrat, which for many Black people, is "something that [they] just do" (White and Laird 2020). Thus, the connection between partisanship and race is not disparate insofar that – to be seen as a racial group member in good standing with fellow Black community members – being a Democrat is integral. This perception is important for those seeking to represent Black interests, especially those representatives who are also Black.

Unlike other identity groups, Black voters' connection to the Democratic Party is the direct result of intra-group social interactions that constrain the behavior of those Black individuals who may see it prudent to support the Republican Party (White and Laird 2020). It is for this reason, I argue, that the conventional wisdom about race and candidate selection for Black voters does not extend to Black Republicans. We have, in the past decade, had three Black Republican presidential candidates, Herman Cain, Dr. Benjamin Carson, and South Carolina Senator Tim Scott. None of these candidates have been effective at getting Black support, despite the prevailing belief that they should, at the very least, be able to siphon off some Black support from the Democratic Party. (Williams 2016; Martin 2015). The inability of Black Republicans to successfully garner Black support is one that scholarly work validates, which is why, on average, the disproportionate number of Black representatives who get support from Black voters are Democrats. This provides an important bound on the conventional wisdom about how Black people select their representatives – partisanship and race are important considerations, but this question remains – Is being a Black Democrat all Black voters need to support a candidate?

Acknowledging and accepting that Obama's success is exceptional, even the narrative that being a Black Democrat seems insufficient to explain how and why Black voters support certain candidates. There are instances, on numerous dimensions and at multiple levels of government, where the assumption of

racial similarities as predictors for support is unfounded. Steve Cohen, a White Democratic Congressman in Memphis, Tennessee has successfully defended his seat in a majority Black district since 2007, despite primary challenges from some well-known and viable Black Democratic candidates. Cohen's success stands on the other side of our expectations about Black voters' support for representatives, which is to say that we should, based on extant literature and public perceptions of Black voters, assume that White candidates should be unable to gain a critical mass of Black support when running against viable Black candidates. Similar outcomes manifested in the 2020 Democratic primary with Joe Biden. It is clear that Black voters have no qualms about supporting White candidates even if there are Black politicians in the fray. But what informs that particular decision?

Thus far, research has led us to believe that race (often assessed by skin color) and partisan affiliation are the chief reasons why certain candidates are chosen by Black voters. However, the examples discussed thus far have shown the confounds in this logic. Chief among them, that Black voters have made electoral choices that ostensibly reject the assumptions that they vote for politicians based solely on how they look. There are numerous fallacies engendered by the perceived role of race that, I contend, have left scholarship unable to nail down the causal mechanisms that adequately predict Black voter candidate preference.

One of the major issues with this presumption is that it undermines the sophistication of the Black community's political calculus by assuming that it is based solely on partisanship and the physical manifestation of their racial identity when for many Black people, being a Democrat is the direct result of the social components of their racial identity. In the questions of racial connection and authenticity leveraged against Obama and Harris, skin color is not the metric by which Black voters assess same-race candidates, but rather something deeper and more intrinsic. The challenges these candidates face are questions pertaining to their connection to the group, perceptions of what they have done, or will do, for the group. This nuanced understanding of race is lost when the focus is solely on the outward manifestation of racial similarity. Moreover, the focus on partisanship seems to overlook primary elections where Democrats, sometimes multiple Black ones, campaign for Black support, complicating the story of how Black voters make choices when there are multiple politicians who the media and scholarship would assume would meet the selection criteria for Black voters.

If the conventional wisdom about why Obama received so much Black support in his presidential runs was true, why is that success yet to be generalized, especially to politicians with similar backgrounds and political strategies? Anthony Brown who; ran for governor of Maryland in 2014, and like Obama, ran a de-racialized campaign, and would have been the first Black governor of a state with a strong and influential Black electorate, but left Black people wondering what he stood for (Gillespie and King-Meadows 2014; Rivers 2014;

Enten 2014; Wagner and Cahill 2014). Furthermore, we should have seen more success for the Black candidates who ran in 2020 using their own personalized racial narratives to connect with Black voters. Finally, based on this belief about Black electoral decision-making, we would not have predicted Steve Cohen's initial or continued success in his majority Black district. Thus, despite the out-pouring of support for Obama in 2008 and 2012, it seems that Black voters are looking for more information about a candidate than their partisanship and race, which leads us to the question: What information are they looking for?

THE COMMUNITY COMMITMENT SIGNALING FRAMEWORK

I argue that Black voters are looking for a candidate's *community commitment*, or their commitment to prioritizing Black interests above their own individual political interest or prestige. This, I posit, is the underlying mechanism that explains why Black voters find some candidates more preferable than others.[9] To that end, representatives seeking Black voter support must communicate this commitment to Black voters by sending certain signals that suggest they are willing or have already placed the needs of the racial group above their own. My *community commitment signaling theoretical framework* draws on signaling theory to explain how the signals work, and on Black individuals' history of using social sanctions to ensure that fellow racial group members are committed to the group norm of prioritizing the group's interest over their self-interest (Walton 1985; White et al. 2014; White and Laird 2020; Wamble et al. 2022).

From there, I argue that Black voters apply this same intragroup expectation of commitment to their political representatives and, in turn, determine whether a candidate is preferable based on the commitment signals they send. Using a large-scale experimental test, I find that Black voters' preference for group prioritization is not confined to same-race candidates. Instead, when a Black or White candidate, particularly men, signal past actions of sacrifice on behalf of the Black community, they are consistently evaluated more positively than those who do not use a community commitment signal or those who rely on their social connections to communicate commitment.

While their expectations are grounded in intra-racial social dynamics, Black voters expect a clearer commitment to group interests from their elected officials because of their heightened status as representatives of the group (McAllistar 2000; Frimer and Skitka 2020). In addition to holding representatives to a higher standard, many of the expectations of commitment to Black interests

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[9] I fully acknowledge that the Black racial group is not monolithic in its perceptions of candidates, their appeals, policies they deem important, or how they seek to address socio-political issues (see Gillespie and Tolbert 2010; Tate 2010). That said, scholars do assert that most Black voters tend to support institutions and individuals that are perceived to be "advancing Black interests" (Dawson 1994; 97).

that Black voters have for their political representatives are epitomized in the sacrifices and actions of civil rights activists, many of whom became among the first political representatives for whom many Black individuals voted. (Ardrey and Nelson 1990); establishing priors for many Black voters about what constitutes effective representation of Black interests.

However, the face of Black political representation is changing as Black civil rights politicians begin to leave office and are replaced by younger, more professionalized Black representatives who did not come out of the civil rights era (Gillespie 2010; Tate 2010). The Black electorate has changed as well because of its overall inclusion in political spaces and reliance on more traditional political means to have their needs met (Tate 1994). This transition in Black politics at both the constituent and representative levels leaves us with two questions: Have the expectations of Black voters shifted as they have gained greater incorporation into mainstream politics? If not, how do non–Civil Rights era politicians communicate their commitment to making the group's interests their primary political concern?

In this book, I argue that despite the shifts in their political circumstance, Black voters' expectations of their representatives remain resolute, and politicians seeking Black voter support have to employ *community commitment signals*. The signals must effectively communicate their commitment to prioritizing the Black community's interest above their own. But what do effective signals look like? How would Black individuals recognize them? I argue that the most recognizable signals would be those that Black people look for in each other to maintain their own credibility within the racial group and have witnessed in certain preferred political representatives, which tended to be those with backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement (Canon 1999). Even though these individuals are leaving office, I posit that it is their actions that made them preferable, are not locked into that era, and can be replicated by those without that background.

Community Commitment Signals

Building on scholarship's finding that, for Black voters, those politicians (mostly Black ones) with a past as civil rights activists are preferable, this book focuses on two signals that scholars of the Civil Rights Movement point to as staples of civil rights activists – *social connections* and *personal sacrifices*.[10] These are signals that are recognizable to Black voters because of their socialization about the importance of the Civil Rights Movement (Morris et al. 1989; Deane et al. 2016), the collective memory of the movement and its influence on their socio-political livelihoods that many Black people still have (Harris

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[10] This is not an exhaustive list of signals, but ones that, based on existing literature, are more likely to be successful because of their roots in the Civil Rights Movement.

2006), and the pictures and narratives of these leaders' sacrifices can often be found in campaign and mobilization materials (Johnson 2014; Booker 2019).

Within the context of the community commitment signaling framework, I contend that politicians who use signals of personal sacrifice to communicate a *realized commitment* through references to past instances where they have put their well-being in jeopardy for the sake of greater inclusion in political and social spaces are more effective in signaling commitment. Personal sacrifice signals are inherently costly which, according to signaling theory, communicates a greater credibility, or, in this context, a greater likelihood of being and remaining committed.

If, as I theorize, Black voters seek to optimize their representation by choosing candidates who are committed to placing the group's interest first, candidates who communicate a realized commitment will be preferred because they have provided evidence of their commitment. Moreover, in the unique historical narrative of Black Americans, the sacrifices made by civil rights activists and early Black politicians led to meaningful and drastic changes in the position of many Black individuals (Holt et al. 2000). Thus, Black people associate personal sacrifice with tangible change, and see it as not only costly but effective.

However, not all politicians can signal personal sacrifice, either because it is not part of their personal narrative or not politically expedient. They instead can rely on social connection community commitment signals that are less costly, and communicate a *potential commitment* to making the Black community's political interest a priority through references and connections to individuals, institutions, and/or symbols that have strong meanings to the racial group. When an individual cannot point to past actions, Black voters have less proof that the politicians relying on these signals are likely to pay the possible costs associated with placing the group's interest before their own. As such, the social connection signal invoked by politicians also needs to convey an existing accountability structure. Whether it be a person or an institution, the information communicated by these signals needs to show more than just a connection, but an understanding of the consequences they would face, namely social sanctions, should their commitment not be realized in their actions.

WHAT COMMUNITY COMMITMENT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Community commitment is an evaluative tool through which Black voters can determine whether a politician is going to represent their interests well. It is more than just being a member of the racial group or political party; community commitment shows an understanding of the Black community's norms and expectations and one's likely adherence to them. Community commitment signals are meant to show that a candidate is dedicated to placing the group's interest first and can be held accountable to the racial group should they make choices based on their self-interest. The signaling is more

than just liking things that are associated with Black culture, or making gestures that suggest solidarity. Black voters want costly displays to determine if the candidate is one of quality who can be counted on. This desire is not solely tied to same-race representatives, but a broader one for a specific kind of representation regardless of who the representative is.

Social Identity Theory and Community Commitment

Over time, scholars have looked at group-based decision-making to explain the behaviors of marginalized groups, such as Black Americans. When distilled down to its core, the premise of descriptive representation relies on social identity theory (SIT). One of the main claims within the vast body of work on SIT is that, for most groups, there is a strong bias toward those who share that group identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Within the literature on descriptive representation, this broad assertion is affirmed in work that shows that Black voters prefer Black representatives over White ones (Tate 1991; Swain 1993; Whitby 1997; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 2004; Griffin and Flavin 2011; Stout 2015; Stout 2018), they are more likely to contact same-race representatives than out-group politicians (Broockman 2014), and many other studies that show this in-group bias. While these findings move us forward in terms of understanding the unique role of co-racial representation, we should not look past the instances where White candidates, such as Steve Cohen or Joe Biden, have garnered support from Black voters over Black candidates.

Generally, the construct of race is conceptualized and studied through the lens of skin color, which means that the "similarities" often discussed refer to the phenotypic characteristics of racial group members. Thus, it is assumed, both inside and outside academic research, that an individual is a member of a group if they share certain physical attributes. While physical manifestations of identity are undoubtedly important, the parameters of one's groupness go beyond those physical characteristics. This is particularly true for Black people, who have a different set of group-based rules that govern their behavior in political spaces. Black people police each other to ensure the group's goals are not overlooked for an individualistic outlook. Indeed, contemporary work in Black politics reveals that, for Black individuals, the social components of one's identity matter immensely.

This reality is succinctly made clear in popular Black adages such as "all skin folk ain't kinfolk" or "Everyone your color ain't your kind." This recognition that group membership is not about how one looks, but rather whether one is willing to work for the group's betterment is seen in the existence and use of social sanctions within the Black community to maintain political cohesion. The use of sanctions to constrain the behavior of those within the racial group suggests that there is an understanding that everyone

who shares the identity may not behave in ways that optimize the position of the group. There is a need to police one another to make sure the group's voice are heard in a way that effectively assists the racial group's progress and inclusion.

SIT does not inherently allow for that level of nuance because its focus is on the in-group/out-group dynamic. The community commitment signaling framework, however, operates with an understanding of the depth and nuance of Black Americans' intra-group dynamic. By building on the social accountability structure and recognizing that a representative's skin color is not the mechanism that leads Black voters to perceive a connection or commitment, my framework creates the space for us to understand how the social dynamic that informs how Black voters police one another influences their candidate selection process as well.

Linked Fate and Community Commitment

Much of the discussion on Black political behavior within the last 30 years has been centered on the concept of linked or shared fate. Linked fate is a sense that what happens to the racial group has some effect on what happens in a person's individual life and is common among many Black individuals (Gurin et al. 1989; Dawson 1994). Scholars have heavily leaned on linked fate as the explanation for much of the group-based behavior in which Black people tend to engage. As the investigation into the relationship between Black voters and their representatives has grown, scholars have found that Black representatives engage with their Black constituents differently than their White counterparts, whether it be in their response to their email inquiries (Broockman 2013) or the information they put on their campaign or official websites (Harden 2015). Much of this work attributes the difference in representational behavior to a sense of linked fate that Black representatives have, Broockman (2013) goes so far as to say it fuels an intrinsic motivation within Black representatives.

When seeking to explain why Black voters prefer certain candidates over others, one inclination might be that Black voters are looking for this shared sense of linked fate. Indeed, Dovi (2002) explains that in their assessment of whether a same-race politician is "one of us," Black individuals use linked fate to determine whether they and their descriptive representative share, what she calls, "a mutual relationship" (738). But I contend that Black individuals require something tangible when making their assessments of candidates, and it is not apparent how politicians might communicate this intrinsic motivation to those they seek to represent, or if these displays lead to any meaningful changes. One might think of the instance when, after the death of Trayvon Martin, then President Obama said of the incident,

You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African American community at least, there's a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it's important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away. There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me – at least before I was a senator. (Obama 2013)

If one wants to see linked fate in action, this passage offers a sense from Obama that the experiences of other Black people are mirrored in his own. He highlights that what happened to Trayvon Martin could have been his own fate. He illustrates his understanding of what happens to a Black person could easily happen to him because they are a member of the same group. Black Republican and South Carolina Senator, Tim Scott, made similar comments in 2016, saying, "I personally understand the pain of being stopped 18 times driving while Black … I do not know many African-American men who do not have a very similar story to tell no matter their profession. No matter their income, no matter their disposition in life" (Kelly 2016).

While these statements show a group-based understanding of the treatment of Black people in America, it is hard to know what, beyond this understanding, they communicate. It could be said that statements like these show a mutual recognition as Dovi states, or even a shared sense of linked fate with other Black people because they highlight experiences both men and many Black people experience. What remains unclear, even if we accept statements like these as external manifestations of linked fate, is what conclusions Black individuals might draw from them. There is no guarantee that Black people heard these statements or others like them and perceived a sense of linked fate, or that those who might have taken away such information would have a change in their evaluations of Obama or Scott.

Conversely, the community commitment signaling framework is built on a strong historical narrative that provides a distinct understanding of what Black voters desire from those who seek to represent them. The framework's reliance on a set of socially rooted expectations that Black voters have removes any guesswork about what appeals will be effective. These expectations are grounded in the Black community's social accountability structure which prizes placing the group above one's own interest for the sake of group betterment. Thus, candidates whose statements and appeals meet this standard will be preferred.

If linked fate was the mechanism by which Black voters were making their distinctions, we would expect that White politicians would be unsuccessful in their appeals because their fate is not linked to Black voters. However, we know that in recent elections, as I have pointed out numerous times, this

is not the case which suggests that there is something else at work in Black voters' calculus. Candidates, regardless of their race can effectively signal community commitment in a variety of ways, which provides a more generalizable means to understand how certain candidates are chosen over others.

VARIATION WITHIN THE BLACK ELECTORATE

Black Americans provide an optimal case for assessing the mechanisms that underlie voter preference for certain representatives. The general high levels of group solidarity in social and political arenas (Gurin et al. 1989; Dawson 1994; White et al. 2014), the use of race as the lens through which they view the political world (Walton 1985; Gurin et al. 1989; Dawson 1994), and a strong and consistent leaning toward the Democratic Party (White and Laird 2020) might suggest that most Black voters' use of skin color and partisanship are the mechanisms for their candidate selection. If, among this extremely cohesive sociopolitical group, an underlying mechanism is found in their assessments of same-race and/or same-party candidates, then my community commitment signaling framework has the potential to provide deeper explanation of the candidate selection processes for other groups who have less cohesion on social and political dimensions (i.e., women, Latinx, LGBTQ+ voters).

This is not to say that all Black voters have the same desires; indeed, scholarship has made it clear that the goal structure of the Black community is varied on many dimensions (Dawson 2001; Harris Lacewell 2004) and who, within the community, gets to dictate the racial group's public agenda is also not uniform (Cohen 1999; Laird 2014). The Black community is in no way monolithic, meaning there are myriad ways that Black people voice, and act on, their desire for change. Throughout much of Black history the journey toward great social and political equality has been met with drastically different tactics (see DuBois/Washington, Martin Luther King Jr./Malcolm X, etc.), but in the end, despite the variation in approach to solving the problems of racism and systemic injustice in the United States, the ends are fairly unified – greater inclusion and equality for Black Americans. This book cannot actively engage with every perspective of the Black community but recognizes the vast amount of diversity held within the racial group in its discussion of "Black interests."

SEEING COMMUNITY COMMITMENT IN ACTION

Scholars investigating Black representation tend to evaluate Black political behavior, such as candidate selection, by investigating general elections. This is a context where Black voters tend to vote, disproportionately, for Democrats. However, by focusing our attention on these elections, it is easy to conflate support for a Democratic candidate, particularly one that is Black, as a manifestation of the conventional wisdom that Black voters

choose candidates because they are Black. While I posit that the influence of community commitment is found in all elections where politicians seek to garner support from Black voters, the possibility of conflating it with other factors, such as race and partisanship, is likely if only sought in general election contexts.

For example, if Black voters support a Black Democrat over a Black Republican, the mechanism at work would be construed as partisanship, and if they chose a Black Democrat over a White Republican it would be perceived as some confluence of both race and partisanship.

If we look at elections such as the 2020 Georgia special elections with Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, we can see the invocation of community commitment signals by both men even in the context of a general election. Warnock ran a television advertisement where he talked about his being the pastor of the church where Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once presided, while Ossoff relied heavily on his relationship with John Lewis in his appeals to Georgia's Black voters.[11,12] Both of these appeals were made during the general election, and both relied on signals of commitment. However, support for those candidates, despite these signals, could be attributed to the fact that both men are Democrats, as are most Black voters, thus Black voters' support of them is merely them toeing the party line. Moreover, some could claim that Black voters' support for Warnock was both because he was a Democrat and a Black man. Even though I contend that the efficacy of community commitment signals are seen in general elections, this book argues that community commitment is made more visible and more apparent in the primary election setting.

More often than not, Black voters have had to choose a candidate in a Democratic primary where partisanship and candidate race are held constant, thus exposing other considerations they make. In these elections, it is easier to see community commitment operate as a mechanism and a strategic choice because, if partisanship and race were the only considerations, all candidates would, ostensibly, receive equal votes from Black voters. However, this is not the case, meaning that Black voters are, even when partisanship and candidate race are the same, using some kind of metric to determine who is more deserving of their support.

This book seeks to establish community commitment as a mechanism that is often overlooked in existing literature on Black voter candidate preferability and political behavior. Leveraging the almost as equally overlooked context of Democratic primaries through experimentation offers the ability to see community commitment signals at work, and to understand the influence they have on candidate evaluations, the kinds of information they communicate to Black voters, and whether they can create meaningful distinctions across Democratic candidates.

[11] www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuNpZvJosNY
[12] https://youtu.be/bozhdELct4c

WHAT'S TO COME

To understand the benchmark Black voters use for political representatives even today, we must know what worked for them in the past. Chapter 1 helps situate our understandings of Black political expectations for representatives by delving into the historical foundations of Black people's candidate preferences, and the evolution of their candidate selection processes and criteria starting with the Reconstruction Era. Much of what we know about Black voters' expectations is rooted at this time in history, when Black men were granted political access for the first time both as voters and elected officials.

As the decades passed, the actions of Black people's political representatives mirrored the actions taken by Black citizens, meaning they too engaged in costly behavior such as protests and demonstrations. By the time the Civil Rights Movement reached its peak, the Black community had a set of expectations for their leaders and a skepticism that required proof from those leaders that they cared more about the group than their own personal ambition. The Civil Rights Movement, this chapter argues, serves as the culmination of the almost century-long journey from the end of their enslavement to their complete political inclusion. Using various polls from the 1960s–1980s, I establish the affective attachment Black individuals had and have toward civil rights leaders, as well as their actions. Through this analysis, I establish a baseline from which we can understand Black evaluations of current politicians. This chapter offers a sense of the archetype of political leadership that many Black voters envision.

Chapter 2 uses the community commitment signaling framework to explain how post–civil rights politicians can make appeals to the Black electorate, many of whom laud the actions and behaviors of the bygone era of Black representation. This chapter discusses how community commitment signals communicate different levels of commitment, and thus affect Black voters' candidate evaluations. Beginning with my central question of what makes certain representatives more preferable, I argue that Black voters' preferences are contingent on their perceptions of the candidate's commitment to prioritizing the group's interest above their own. I begin by first reviewing the relevant literature on the relationship between Black voters and their representatives. I investigate how the many insights gained from this research point to the importance of Black voters' perceptions of same-race representatives, and the subsequent alterations in Black voters' attitudes and behaviors. I conclude this chapter by offering a set of general expectations for what we might expect to observe in the empirical tests of my theory.

Chapter 3 highlights the prevalence of the conventional wisdom about Black political behavior in much of scholarly work in this realm. It argues that Black people's use of race as a political tool goes beyond a mere heuristic and shows, using popular observational data, that there is more to the story of Black voters' calculus. Indeed, existing work's use of the binary "Race of

Representative" variable as the main covariate overlooks the sophistication in Black political decision-making. I use one of the main dependent variables in Tate's *Black Faces in the Mirror* (2004), whether the candidate is seen as a prestige seeker or a problem solver, to explain that Black voters make meaningful distinctions between candidates based on whether they seek prestige or help solve the group's problems. I find strong evidence that supports that those politicians seen as prestige seekers, whether they are Black or non-Black, are negatively evaluated relative to those who are perceived as helpers.

Chapter 4 pushes back against the claim that the strategies and signals sent by those politicians seeking to represent Black people are constrained by the generation to which they belong. This chapter highlights the fact that these signals are strategic and can be used both by those with or without a history of activism during the Civil Rights Movement. To accomplish this, Chapter 4 provides a direct and aggregated test of the community commitment signaling framework, and a bridge between contemporary work which explains that Civil Rights leaders tend to be more successful and the change in the guard of politicians soliciting Black support. What is not clear in past work is why Civil Rights leaders tended to garner more success from Black voters.

To that end, Chapter 4 argues personal sacrifice is why the civil rights politicians were more successful, and why their contemporaries could be as well when compared to other politicians who employ other community commitment signals. Using the aggregated experimental data to compare the effect of social connection and personal sacrifice signals to a candidate who does not employ community commitment signaling, I find strong and consistent support for this claim. Finally, Chapter 4 provides the foundation on which the subsequent empirical chapters will build showing not only that personal sacrifice is the most effective means to convey community commitment, but that Black individuals use these signals to glean high amounts of information about the candidate.

In Chapter 5, I move to understand the empirical connection between perceptions of community commitment and Black candidate evaluations. Building on the analysis of Chapter 4, I provide stronger proof of the connection between certain community commitment signals and a Black candidate's success with Black voters. To do this, I experimentally manipulate different community commitment signals employed by Black politicians and examine changes in Black voters' perceptions and evaluations. I test my framework on 2,050 Black participants to isolate the effect of community commitment and make it clear that it is indeed the determining factor in the success of some Black politicians over others. This experimental design complicates the community commitment signaling narrative by adding signals of both personal sacrifice and social connection signals to explore how these different signals lead to variation within the evaluations of the candidates.

Specifically, I find that signals of personal sacrifice, particularly those of a physical nature, such as those made during the Civil Rights Movement,

resonate the most with Black voters. These kinds of signals lead the candidate to be seen more positively and more likely to gain support from Black individuals. The chapter divides its analysis up by the gender of the candidate and finds that community commitment signals are most effective for the Black man candidate because the Black woman candidate's commitment is presumed to be so high without any signaling that it causes a ceiling effect suggesting meaningful differences in the perceptions of community commitment based on Black candidates' gender.

In Chapter 6, I seek to solidify the generalizability of the community commitment signaling framework by testing and examining its effects on Black voters' evaluations of White men and women candidates who use the same signals as those used in Chapter 5. If, as I theorize, the mechanism underlying preferences for certain representatives is truly perceptions of community commitment, and not shared life experience, then the signals should be able to work for White candidates.

I begin with a discussion of how the use of signals to appeal to Black voters is not unique to Black politicians or foreign to White ones. I discuss the ways prominent White politicians, including 2016 and 2020 Presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, use certain signals to garner Black support. I follow this with a deeper dive into how and why Black expectations can be extended to White politicians despite being viewed by many Black people as ineffective representatives, especially when compared to same-race representatives (Tate 2004; Phoenix 2019; Burge et al. 2020).

I employ the same experimental design with another set of 2,050 Black subjects and find strong and consistent evidence that when a White man candidate signals personal sacrifice, again physical proving to be the most effective, Blacks view him more positively relative to the de-racialized control where no signal of commitment is used. Like in Chapter 5, I investigate any meaningful differences in the effect of community commitment signaling based on the gender of the candidate. I find, that like the Black candidates, there is a difference between White women and men candidates, but unlike their Black woman counterparts, White women experience a floor effect where, regardless of the signaling they employ, they are unable to amass meaningful support from Black voters.

In the final chapter, I outline the major findings and takeaways from this text as well as the significant contribution of my theory of community commitment signaling. I follow up with a discussion of the broader implications of the research. First, I turn back to the 2008, 2012, and 2016 Presidential elections to extrapolate the successes, failures, and unique accomplishments of candidate appeals to Black voters.[13] Then I discuss the 2020 presidential election to discuss the important role Black voters played in the success both in the

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[13] www.washingtonpost.com/politics/candidates-press-to-connect-with-Black-voters/2019/03/02/04d02618-3ae5-11e9-a2cd-307b06d0257b_story.html?utm_term=.899168582189

Democratic primary and the general election.[3] I discuss how challenging signaling commitment to Black voters is, especially in national or many statewide elections, where politicians must also appeal to White voters. Research tells us that White voters are less supportive of Black candidates whose racial appeals seem to show favoritism to Black voters (Wamble and Laird 2018). I engage arguments about the implications this research has for the kinds of Black politicians who gain public office, the way these signals may change depending on the office politicians seek to occupy, and the potential concessions Black voters are willing to make when considering supporting certain co-racial candidates. I conclude the chapter by outlining the directions for future research based on my theoretical framework.