Community Commitment Signaling Framework

People will never fight for your freedom if you have not given evidence that you are prepared to fight for it yourself
-Bayard Rustin

Recent developments in Black politics, I argue, make it clear that the findings in the literature about how Black voters choose politicians to support do not fully incapsulate the breadth and complexity of Black voter candidate preferability, and invite us to investigate other ways to explain what makes certain candidates preferable to Black voters. For example, similar to Anthony Brown, whom I discussed in the introduction, Artur Davis lost the state's gubernatorial Democratic primary against a white Democratic opponent in 2010 due, in large part, to lower than projected levels of Black support despite the prospect of being the first Black governor of Alabama (Cose 2010). Moreover, existing frameworks cannot explain why Memphis Representative Steve Cohen, a white Democratic politician, has been able to attain and maintain Black support in his majority Black district despite challenges from well-known and viable Black candidates (Brown 2009).

In this chapter, I offer my *community commitment signaling framework*, which elucidates how the rhetorical claims made by political representatives to Black people communicate their commitment to prioritizing the Black community's political interests. I argue that a candidate's perceived *community commitment,* or commitment to putting the Black community's interests above their own political interest or prestige, is the underlying mechanism that explains why Black voters find some

candidates more preferable than others.[29] Representatives seeking Black voter support must communicate this commitment to Black voters by sending certain signals.

The foundation of this framework comes from signaling theory (Spence 1975), and the history of many Black individuals' using social accountability 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 and Laird 2020). From there, I argue that Black voters apply this same intragroup expectation of commitment to those who seek to represent them in political office and, in turn, determine whether that representative is preferable based on the commitment signals that are sent.

What makes community commitment signaling an effective tool for candidate selection is that it allows Black voters to optimize the kind of representative they get at the onset of an election, as opposed to waiting to hold them accountable until they are in office. The community commitment signaling framework expands understandings of representation because it relies on more than shared physical characteristics as a necessary and sufficient tenet of a politician's ability to represent the interests of Black voters. Instead, I consider how Black voters' candidate selection process is informed by the racial group's norms and expectations to find the mechanism within the group's decision-making. I then apply that understanding to the representative/Black constituent relationship to offer a causal explanation as to why some candidates, even those affiliated with the Democratic Party, are less preferable. Exploring Black individuals' desire for community commitment shows the sophisticated and strategic nature with which Black voters use their racial identity and racial group expectations to choose the best political representative available to them.

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

In the pages to come, I discuss what we know about how Black voters have chosen candidates to support in elections, and gaps in that understanding which necessitate further investigation. Building on history, psychology, economics, and other disciplines, my community commitment signaling framework contributes to these previous explanations by focusing on the social aspects of Blackness that Black individuals use to ensure that group members and, as I assert in this text, political representatives are committed to prioritizing the racial group's social and political interests. It is not my claim that skin color is an unimportant part of Black voters' calculus as to whom they select as a representative. Rather, I contend that placing focus on the social aspects of Black racial identity offers a more holistic way to understand how and why Black voters choose certain candidates, across racial identities, to support.

Black Voters' Candidate Selection Process

Much of the literature on the candidate selection criteria of Black voters is based on their strong preference for descriptive representatives, who Jane Mansbridge (1999) posits are "individuals who in their own backgrounds mirror some of the more frequent experiences and outward manifestations of belonging to the [constituents'] descriptive group" (628). Mansbridge (1999) maintains that descriptive representation serves as an important means to ensure that the voices of those voters who have been systematically excluded from political discourse are heard. Over time, the literature on descriptive representation has been widely studied and found to have profound effects on the political behavior of Black Americans (Tate 2004).

Phillips Griffiths (1960) discusses descriptive representation in Britain as it relates to Members of Parliament (MPs) and their socioeconomic class. He argues that British working-class citizens complain that their voices are not being heard due to a lack of working-class M.Ps. He contends that working-class citizens assume that with a greater number of MPs like them (i.e. working class), these representatives would have "a keener sense of the problems and attitudes of

working class people" (188). For Phillips, descriptive representatives are a sample of a certain population who can speak to the issues that face that group of people. These representatives are not made, but rather perceived by individuals of a population as being similar enough in a meaningful way that signals that this individual(s) can adequately act on behalf the group (188). Griffiths's definition of descriptive representation does not rely on race, skin color, or any physical aspect, but simply on similarities. His discussion of working-class M.P.s is an example where physical appearance may not be the similarity individuals cling to, but instead one's socioeconomic status. More contemporary studies on Black descriptive representation generally find that Black voters are more communicative with their representative (Broockman 2014), and experience increases in political knowledge, empowerment, and willingness to engage the political system (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Lublin 1999; Tate 2004; Gleason and Stout 2014; Stout 2015; Stout 2018). However, the utility of co-racial representation is not without debate with some scholars arguing that, if the goal of representation is to provide legislation to assist in the advancement of Black political inclusion, this can be attained regardless of the race of the representative (Swain 1993).

In her seminal book *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress*, Carol Swain (1993) asks this very question- Is descriptive representation for Black voters the best means to have their interests addressed in Congress? She argues that the racial background of the representative does not have any bearing on one's ability to provide substantive representation, or representation focused on policy, for constituents. She shows, through a series of case studies, that it is possible for Black representatives to be elected and effectively represent whites in majority white districts (see also Canon 1999). While she highlights the possibilities for Black elected officials to represent majority white districts, she seemingly misses what some might call the intrinsic motivation (Broockman 2014), or as Whitby (1997) writes, the "unique racial consciousness and belief system that makes [B]lack representatives predisposed to vote the way most [B]lacks in

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the district would want the legislation to vote anyway" (83). This apparent predisposition seems to be at odds with Swain's claim that Black legislators can effectively represent whites without hurting the Black community (Swain 1993; 141). However, the premise of Swain's argument is that the sole aim of descriptive representation is to provide legislative means for Black people, which according to other scholars is simply one aim amongst a myriad. Mansbridge (1999) highlights the affective components of co-racial representation arguing that "descriptive representation promotes goods unrelated to substantive representation" (628).

Katherine Tate's (2004) *Black Faces in the Mirror: African Americans and their Representatives in the U.S. Congress* uses the 1996 National Black Election Study to investigate the "goods" to which Mansbridge alludes, and argues that there is meaning in the unique and symbolic meaning, for Black Americans, to have a Black politician represent them. She has good reason to make this assertion, as the work of Bobo and Gilliam (1990) tell us that Black voters do have a strong emotional attachment to same race representation, which can induce an increased sense of political efficacy. This sense of empowerment is an important facet of descriptive representation and maps on to the definition offered by Mansbridge (1999). Tate moves these conclusions further through a series of empirical tests showing that the symbolism of having a Black representative not only makes Black voters feel more included in politics, but has strong implications for how Black voters behave politically and evaluate their representative. This work provides compelling empirical evidence of what theories surrounding descriptive representation have suggested, that the purpose of descriptive representation goes beyond substantive representation by tapping into feelings of political efficacy and empowerment, and fostering increased trust in the system.

There is no denying the merit of the existing literature which points out the importance of same race representation, but this work begs a larger question- what about the preferences and considerations of Black voters? The work used to explain the importance of co-racial representation

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offers very little evidence for what it is that Black voters are looking for in their representatives. Put another way, we are presented with the outcomes of "being represented by a Black representative" as opposed to what Black voters want from those who seek to represent them. In short, we are missing the beginning of descriptive representation's story. Should we assume that all descriptive representatives are the same? Or is there something unique about the ones who were elected by Black people and subsequently positively evaluated by Black voters in the surveys used in past work? What mechanism leads descriptive representatives to be more preferred, and to what extent is it tied only to same race representatives?

Suzanne Dovi (2002) cautions scholars not to prescribe a uniformity to the lived experiences of descriptive representatives. Instead, she invites us to consider how the variation in the lived experiences of some descriptive representatives informs whether, and how much, voters prefer those representatives over others. In order for a descriptive representative to be preferable over another, that representative needs to "possess strong mutual relationships" with the subgroup with which they identify. Moreover, "representatives and members of historically disadvantaged groups must mutually recognize each other" (Dovi 2002; 735). By "mutually recognize," Dovi means that the voters must recognize the politician as a member of their identity group, and the politician must, in turn, recognize their constituents as members of the group with which they identify (736). We should not assume that Black voters view all descriptive representatives similarly. Indeed, the popular Black adage "all skin folk ain't kinfolk" provides anecdotal evidence of Dovi's argument that the mutual recognition of Black politicians by Black voters is not automatic.

What is not clear, from Dovi's work is what Black people are looking from their descriptive representatives. Dovi (2002) theorizes preferable Black descriptive representatives are those seen as "one of us," but I contend that the notion of being "one of us" is not zero-sum, and that understanding the nuances within group-based appeals is necessary to understand voter preferences.

She argues that the perceived linked fate of a candidate is the mechanism that makes a candidate recognizable to Black voters and thus more preferable. However, I argue that a sense of linked fate is intrinsic and there has been little to know work on what its external manifestations look like, or whether Black people can discern one's sense that what happens to the racial group has an effect on their life (see also Broockman 2014). Moreover, even if they could perceive one's linked fate, I argue that such a belief does not necessarily indicate that the person will be a good representative in political office, only that they understand what it means to be Black in America.

Some scholars attempt to address the relationship between descriptive representatives and co-racial voters by analyzing policy preferences of Black voters and the legislative record of Black politicians to see if congruence on these dimensions leads to better representation for Black individuals (see Whitby 1997; Lublin 1999). However, this manuscript deviates from this line of inquiry and argues that voters' evaluations of descriptive representatives occur in an information environment on a different kind of information (discussed further in chapter 3).

Indeed, Richard Fenno (2003) argues that the Black representatives in his study relied on social connections to gain support from their constituents more than hard policy stances (258). He goes on to claim that "a vote in Congress is but the tiny tip of a huge iceberg of policy dialogue and policy connections at home." In his time with Representative Lou Stokes, Fenno notes, "[Stokes] would be given the benefit of the doubt and not held to any strict itemized accounting of his behavior in Washington" (31). Cohen (2003) affirms Fenno's observations and shows that group identity has the ability to "overwhelm policy's objective content and ideological beliefs" (808). More to the point, because most Black politicians are Democrats, their policy stances and positions will not vary much from their opponents in Democratic primaries. I argue this lack of policy distinction leads voters to consider non-policy differences, such as one's commitment to placing the interests of the group above their own individual interests or prestige, when choosing a candidate to support.

The theoretical and empirical investigation of this book will engage the relationship between black voters and potential representatives outside of the policy related domain.

To explain what may make certain representatives more preferable to Black voters, existing scholarship tend to focus on the relationship Black voters have with same race candidates. Stout (2015) makes similar claims to that of Dovi (2002) in his investigation of the role of deracialized political appeals from Black representatives and their influence on the attitudes of Black, Latino, and White individuals. He explores how different kinds of racialized appeals affect whether a candidate is supported, and finds that Black voters prefer candidates who rely on positive racial appeals (those that do not deride an opponent's racial identity). Despite his informative findings, he offers little explanation for why these appeals are more successful, or how variation, even within positive appeals, might affect how Black candidates are evaluated.

It remains unclear, however, if the affective and political attachments Black voters have towards Black representatives is unique because of the presumed shared experiences and similar physical features, or if Black voters attaching themselves to representatives based on other criterion that goes beyond skin color. It is possible that Black representatives are simply more likely to meet this criterion, making them more apparent recipients of the affective rewards associated with descriptive representation? This chapter offers an answer to this question through the community commitment signaling framework, and argues that the desire for a political representative who is committed to the racial group is one that can be generalized outside of the descriptive representation paradigm.

Minding the [Generational] Gap

Though the representation of Black voters is changing due, in large part, to the generational shift in those who seek to represent that Black community, I posit that the expectations for commitment to group prioritization within the Black citizenry has not changed. This means that

representatives without the ability to communicate an inherent sense of commitment through their sacrifices during the Civil Rights Movement need to communicate that commitment in different ways.

To that end, I have developed the *Community Commitment Signaling Framework* to outline and discuss how non-Civil Rights politicians can show Black voters than they are committed to placing the group's interests above their own. Drawing on signaling theory from economics, I develop this framework that argues that signals of commitment communicate either a realized commitment or a potential commitment. In signaling theory, scholars claim that those sending the signal, signalers, recognize the expectations of those receiving the signals, receivers, and use certain signals to communicate an underlying message of compliance with the receivers' expectations. In the context of this manuscript, Black voters are the receivers, politicians are the signalers, and the community commitment signals are rhetorical claims of a candidate's commitment to prioritizing the racial group and its interests above her own personal interests.

This framework moves us forward in our thinking of how Black voters choose certain candidates over others by offering a deeper look into the role that racial identity plays in their decision-making process. Generally, our expectations have been that if you were Black and a Democrat you were preferable to a white representative, but this theory and framework takes a deeper look into preferability and contends that how one signals their commitment and prioritization of the group matters for whether Black people support them.

Though I build this framework from the actions and behaviors of Black civil rights politicians, I believe that Black voters' expectations for representation are not contingent on the race of the politician. Rather, it is their desire for a specific kind of representation that drives the support they give. If they believe that a candidate, regardless of their race, can provide them the necessary access to increase their political power as a group, they will support that candidate. This means that

there may be contexts in which a Black candidate is less desirable than a white one (see the 2007 election in Tennessee's 1st Congressional district or the 2020 Presidential Democratic Primary). For Black voters, the candidate selection process is about who is able to optimize Black people's political representation by commitment to the norms and expectations of the group, which is not a forgone conclusion based on whether the candidate looks like them.

That said, given the expectations of the racial group and the fact that most Black voters, particularly when voting at the local level, are choosing Black representatives, it is likely that Black voters will assume that Black representatives are better suited to represent the group's interest. That does not mean that they are unwilling or even unlikely to support a non-Black candidate if they are able to show a higher level of commitment to the group than their Black counterpart. This distinction is a meaningful departure from existing literature which focuses on the similarity of skin color to determine who will get Black support. By focusing on the desires of the racial group based on the social accountability structure within which most Blacks abide and operate, I am able to broaden the scope through which we understand and explain the political choices Black voters make as it pertains to the candidates they choose to support. Given that the Black electorate is a powerhouse within the Democratic Party, having this nuanced understanding of how Black voters choose their candidate is imperative as the assortment of candidates running for office and seeking Black support becomes more diverse.

Signaling Theory & Black Voter Candidate Preferability

To better assess how community commitment signals generally work, I draw on signaling theory. Often found in economics and business management literature, signaling theory tells us that individuals, corporations, or institutions send certain signals to communicate their credibility to another party in need of particular information (Spence 1973; Spence 2002). Within signaling theory, there are signalers, signals, and receivers. There are two dominant tenets of signaling theory:

1. The receiver needs certain kinds of information from and about the signaler to establish their credibility.

2. The signals used need to be recognizable to the receiver.

An example often used to explain signaling theory is the job application process. An employer, or the receiver, needs certain information about an individual's ability to meet the requirements of the job. Potential candidates, the signalers, use their education level and, perhaps, their previous experience, as signals to communicate their ability to fulfill the job requirements. These signals provide underlying information about an individual's aptitude to learn and adapt for the position (Spence 1973).

Using signaling theory to explain Black voter candidate preferability allows me to optimize the communication dynamic between representatives and their Black potential Black supports because it focuses on the underlying information that is being communicated. In the same way that one's education level on a résumé communicates their ability to do their job, I contend that those seeking to gain support from Black voters also communicate underlying information of commitment to Black voters through their rhetorical appeals. In the example of job attainment, the employer is trying to fill in the gaps of information about a person's qualifications for a job by looking at one's education level or previous experience, which are suggestive of the person's skillset, or their capacity to learn how to do what is expected of them. Like individuals who are trying to hire someone, Black individuals are looking for certain kinds of information from those seeking their electoral support. After all, political candidates are, simply put, applying for the job of representing the group's interests in office.

Like any potential employer, Black people have a set of expectations for the candidates who want to represent them, and they are evaluating candidates based on their perceived commitment to prioritizing the group's interest. To determine one's qualification, Black individuals examine the

signals or appeals employed by candidates to determine the candidate's aptitude and commitment to

abide by and adhere to the norms and expectations of being committed to placing the group's

interest first. Put simply, as education serves a proxy for one's job qualifications, community

commitment signals serve as indicators of one's ability to do what Black voters expect.

Community Commitment Signaling

The community commitment signaling framework is built on the social accountability

structure, and argues that, because Black people expect this group prioritization behavior from their

counterparts, they are even more likely to want some evidence from those elected officials who seek

to represent them (Skitka and Frimer 2020). But what should these signals look like? I argue that the

most recognizable signals would be those that Black people expect from one another, and have

witnessed in the behavior of certain preferred political representatives, who tended to be those with

backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement (Canon 1999).

It is from the toolkit of those civil rights politicians that I draw to investigate the influence

and power of two community commitment signals- social connections (Williams 1997) and personal

sacrifice (Chong 1999). [30] These signals, I argue, are recognizable to Black voters, per the tenets of

signaling theory, because of Black people's socialization about the importance of Civil Rights

Movement (Morris et al. 1989; Deane et al. 2016), the collective memory of the movement and its

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[30] Though there are, I recognize, numerous spaces in which Black individuals seek out these signals of commitment. Indeed, Camille Burge and her colleagues (2020) argue that skin tone can serve as a signal of commitment for Black voters. Given the strategic nature with which Black voters engage in politics, particularly candidate selection, it is no surprise that there are myriad factors that Black voters look to optimize their representation. For the sake of this text, I will focus on these two kinds of signals as they are well represented in contemporary appeals to Black voters as I will show through the rest of this manuscript.

influence on their social and political livelihoods that many Blacks still have (Harris 2006), and the pictures and narratives of the leaders' sacrifices found in campaign and mobilization materials (Johnson 2014; Booker 2019). Thus, they serve as strong signals of commitment that non-civil rights politicians can communicate to convey their commitment. Even though these individuals are leaving office, I posit that it is their actions which made them preferable, and those can be replicated by those without that background.

Though the Civil Rights Movement is a big part of the way contemporary Black voters understand sacrifices and effective political leadership, the tradition of activism is not locked into the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, we have seen activism and social movements that preceded the Civil Rights Movement as well as come after it. The uniqueness of the Civil Rights Movement is, in some ways, the political manifestation of the efforts of that movement, namely the acquisition of the franchise and access to other political avenues from which they had been blocked for decades. However, the outcomes specific to the mid 1950s to the late 1960s does not contain the whole of the Black activist tradition. Indeed, the practice of activism is still very much a part of the pathos within Black politics.

The continuation of the activist tradition is most evident in the actions of House Representatives Cori Bush, Nikema Williams, and Jamal Bowman as well as Mayor Ras Baraka- all these activists are continuing in the tradition of the social movements that came before them, but behave without attachment to that moment and that movement. These individuals are post-civil rights who engage in activism, before or after they have been elected into office. Again, this is not the only factor that plays a part in the candidate selection process for Black voters. Indeed, Cori Bush ran and lost in 2018 despite her activism during the Ferguson Uprising of 2014, but in her 2020 campaign, she discussed her activism at length, and to great effect, when seeking to connect with voters (Atlantic article, Teen Vogue piece). She was running against Lacy Clay, an incumbent

whose family had been in office for decades, so he had more than incumbency advantage, he had a legacy that even her activism could not overcome until the salience of the moment called for higher levels of commitment than the incumbent was offering.

Physical sacrifice is not tied to the Civil Rights Movement, but rather the Civil Rights Movement set the benchmark for Black people's understanding of why this form of activism is effective for furthering the political cause of the Black community. The practice of placing one's well-being on the line for a cause is something that we continue to see in different contexts, like the Movement for Black Lives which is ongoing in this contemporary moment. In those individuals who have been active in this movement, like Bush and Bowman, we see that the tradition of activism for the sake of bettering the conditions and circumstances of the Black community endure. The Civil Rights Movement provides the lens through which Black people can understand the potential efficacy of sacrifice, but it is not the only social movement that matters to Black voters. It is the activism and what those activists who became politicians did which resonates with Black voters.

While the Civil Rights Movement remains extremely salient, it serves as a jumping off point in this contemporary moment of what activism can do, and what outcomes can look like for the Black community if we move those who are willing to place their well-being, particularly their physical well-being, on the line. The celebration of the sacrifices made by Civil Rights Movement leaders has created a lens for many Black Americans that is used as a way to think about the sacrifices of more contemporary activist politicians. If we place the Movement for Black Lives in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, we can understand why personal sacrifice, particularly of a physical nature continues to resonate with many Black individuals. There is an understanding that, if you are putting your physical well-being in jeopardy, your concern and care for the group is made clearer and more evident.

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This practice of activism and how these activists engage in politics may not seem formalized to those outside of the group, but is the direct result of the actions taken by Ella Baker, John Lewis, and Julian Bond as well as numerous others. These people have provided Black people an appreciation of how meaningful and effective activism can be giving Black people a stronger sense of what the outcomes of these movements can look like. And, if as I argue, many Black voters are seeking to optimize their political position, why not choose candidates who are behaving in ways that are similar to the Civil Rights Movement predecessors?

In my community commitment signaling framework, politicians are the signalers, using signals to communicate their ability and likelihood of being committed to placing the group's interest above their own. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, I contend that each of these signals communicates a different level of commitment, and will, as a result of that variation, lead to different responses from Black voters in terms of how they evaluate a candidate based on the signal they receive. Politicians need to show Black voters that, through a connection to the racial group or past sacrifice(s) for Black people, they understand what the group expects of them and are likely to fulfill those expectations, if they have not already. On the other hand, social connection community commitment signals an implicit accountability mechanism and a potential commitment to prioritizing the group's interests.
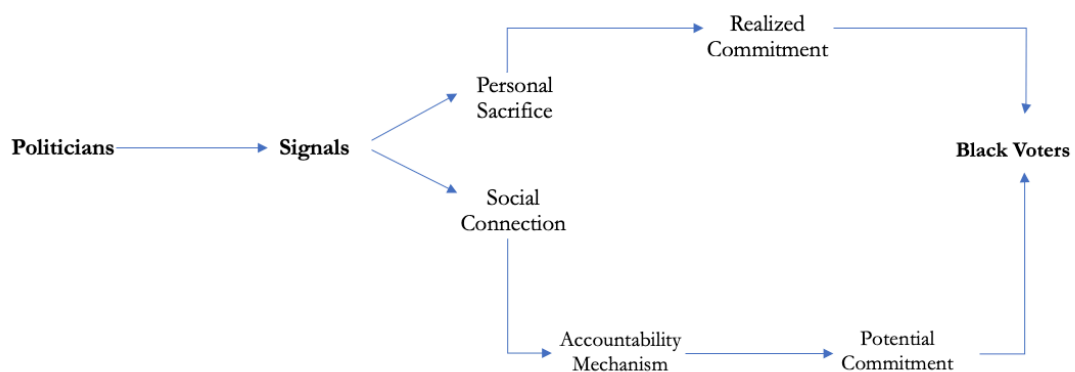
Figure 2.1. An Illustration of the Community Commitment Signaling Framework

Politicians often signal information to voters (Fenno 1973; Fenno 2003; Grimmer 2013). Per signaling theory, these signals provide the underlying, unobserved information necessary to convince voters that they, the politicians, are committed to the Black community's interests. Scholars of signaling theory suggest that the use of signals should provide some tangible benefit for the signaler that would not have occurred had a signal not been employed (Spence 1973; Spence 2002; Srivastava 2001). In the case of political representatives, I argue that the benefit is more positive affective evaluations as well as a greater willingness to support them. A strong signal of credibility and aptitude shows a representative not only understands the group norm of placing the group's interest first, but is, in the words of Walton (1985) "active[ly] sharing" in those interests. The receivers are Black voters, who want to optimize their political representations by choosing a candidate whose signals reflect an understanding of their expectations and seek signals of community commitment to the group's interest from political representatives.

Srivastava (2001) explains that all signals do not communicate the same underlying cost and credibility. Returning to the job application example, every candidate who applies may not have the direct skillset required by the employer based on educational attainment, but they can still work to show an ability to do the job for which they have applied or an ability to learn the skills necessary. Similarly, and as displayed in Figure 2.1, the personal sacrifice and social connection community commitment signals sent to Black voters will not convey the same level of commitment to group interest prioritization. This is not to say that the signals are at odds with one another, but rather those signals that communicate a higher cost will be preferable as they suggest a greater level of commitment than less costly signals.

Community Commitment Signals

Personal Sacrifice

In signaling theory, receivers determine of the signaler's credibility based on perceptions of the signals' costliness, and the costlier a signal, the greater the likelihood it is perceived to be credible (Bird and Smith 2005). In his findings that individuals who make personal sacrifices for the group are rewarded with higher status in the group, sociologist Robb Willer (2009) corroborates the claims made by scholars of signaling theory about the importance of a signal's perceived cost. Personal sacrifice signals are inherently costly, which bolsters my contention that politicians who communicate a _realized commitment_, or past instances where they have put their well-being in jeopardy for the sake of greater inclusion political and social spaces, through references to personal sacrifices are more effective in signaling the likelihood of staying committed.

Existing literature on leadership styles makes it clear that personal sacrifice tends to resonate with individuals because it signifies a commitment to a group and a willingness to operate on behalf of the group (Knippenberg and Knippenberg 2005). This reifies my own argument about community commitment signaling, which emphasizes the fact that personal sacrifice is the most effective signal to communicate commitment, due in large part to the fact showing a willingness and likelihood of giving something up is something that people like to see. However, if personal sacrifice is something that is meaningful to many people across racial backgrounds, is there something unique about it for Black individuals that might set this kind of signal apart for this particular racial group?

While a desire for personal sacrifice exists in most people, as I discuss in chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter, Black people's unique historical narrative illustrates the importance of sacrifice for the sake of racial group progress. Moreover, there is a social group structure wherein putting one's personal interests after that of the group is prized and demanded from other group members. As argued in the previous chapter, the desire for costly behavior stems from the sacrifices many Black voters had to make for the group's progress. More to the point, those sacrifices led to major

social and political changes to the lived experiences of Black Americans in very tangible and widely discussed ways. Thus, when placed in historical context, the continued salience of personal sacrifice and its unique influence on the way Black voters viewed a representative is more apparent.

Furthermore, Black people's desire for personal sacrifice is unique insofar as that it taps into a social based group understanding of the behavior that has the greatest potential to optimize the socio-political position of the Black community. Personal sacrifice might be important for many people, but Black voters are part of a social structure that is tied to the idea of being committed to placing the group's interest above their own as its foundation. Personal sacrifice is a strong indicator of an understanding of the racial group's social accountability structure. The personal sacrifices made by both Black elites and rank and file Black citizens, throughout much of Black history, provide many Black people with a sense that personal sacrifice is not just an amorphous concept, but something with tangible potential benefits for the Black community (Holt et al 2000).

Personal Sacrifice & Realized Commitment

Returning to the resume signaling theory example, people who have past job experience or worked a job that was similar to the one to which they were applying are more appealing to an employer because there is less uncertainty as to whether they are going to be able to fulfill the required skills. Though one's education level can provide some of this information, their past experience has the potential to communicate more about their credibility. Similarly, I argue that politicians signal personal sacrifice when they reference an instance whereby they have *already* placed group's interest above their personal interests. These signals can include participation in protests or marches, but also include instances when politicians chose the community's well-being over their own financial well-being. I theorize that politicians who signal personal sacrifice show a realized accountability to the black community. The social accountability mechanism of the black community is meant to foster the mentality of furthering the racial group's interests by placing the group's

interest above one's self interest, and I posit that the personal sacrifices of certain black politicians embody that ideal. Personal sacrifice allows black politicians to show black voters that they have a history of placing the group's interests above their own self-interest for the purpose of helping the black community, even if it means risking their lives or their jobs.

A contemporary political example of a display of personal sacrifice is when, at a rally for gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams in Georgia in 2018, Congressman and civil rights icon, John Lewis, said "I got arrested a few times. During the 60s, I was arrested 40 times. Since I've been in Congress, I've been arrested another 5 times. And I'm probably gonna get arrested again for something… I gave a little blood on the bridge in Selma. 53 years ago. I almost died." (NBC News 2018). Lewis's highlighting his near-death experience during a protest in the Civil Rights Movement conveys a realized commitment because it illustrates an instance wherein he nearly gave his life to ensure Black people gained social and political equality.

In the same year, Georgia State Senator Nikema Williams of the state's majority Black 39th district was arrested while protesting with her constituents "amid lingering turmoil over the state's contentious gubernatorial election." With her hands held behind her back by officers, Williams told the press, "I was singled out as a [B]lack female senator standing in the rotunda with constituents in the Capitol, a body that I serve in, and I was singled out and arrested today for standing with so many Georgians who are demanding that every vote be counted" (Phillips 2018). After Lewis passed away in 2020, Williams was selected to replace him on the ticket, and ultimately won.

In an interview, Williams referenced her arrest and called herself, "a student of the John Lewis school of politics" who has "practiced the art of getting into 'good trouble.'" She went on to say "[w]e need someone who is not afraid to put themselves on the line for their constituents in the same way that Congressman Lewis taught us to" (Rogers 2020).

It is also important to note the similarities in the quotes from both Lewis and Williams, as both highlighted their respective pasts of putting themselves in harm's way for the sake of those they represent. Each of these quotes provide realized commitment to the Black community because both Lewis and Williams recognized the need to protest for what they and their constituents believed and were willing to sacrifice themselves.

Though one of the examples provided above comes from a politician who was active during the Civil Rights Movement, the second comes from one who benefitted from Lewis's sacrifices and is following in his footsteps by making her own personal sacrifices. This juxtaposition provides compelling evidence that personal sacrifice is not at all solely tied to those with legacies in the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, I contend the realized commitment can be communicated through personal sacrifice signals that come from non-civil rights politicians. We see examples of younger politicians behaving in ways similar to their more traditional Black politicians like Newark, New Jersey Mayor Ras Baraka leading a protest to increase the number of jobs in his city (Associated Press), Missouri Congresswoman Cori Bush frequently referencing her time on the front lines during protests in Ferguson, MO (coribush.org), and Ohio mayoral candidate Yvette Simpson similarly referencing her time in local Black Lives Matter protests when running in the Democratic primary election (Knight 2017). These examples offer evidence that the activities that are often associated with civil rights politicians are not temporally bound, but rather, can be found in younger politicians as well.

Social Connection

Earlier in this chapter, I argue that Black people apply the social accountability structure to their representatives in order to gauge their willingness and likelihood of prioritizing the group. If a candidate is unable to show sacrifice, Black people will look for another indication of commitment. Their need for information about whether a potential representative is committed does not go away

because their signal does not offer existing evidence, rather they will simply look for other indicators of commitment and accountability. I argue candidates can fill in the information gap Black voters will have as to the candidate's ability to meet the expectations Black individuals have by referencing their connections to individuals, organizations, and symbols of importance to members of the racial group.

Returning again to the toolkit of Civil Rights Movement activists, it is clear that strong organizational and personal connections within the racial group were an integral part of their drive to help the community. Indeed, many of these men and women were attached the Black church and other civil rights organizations such as SNCC and the NAACP. There were also strong connections to the community, as some activists were related to prominent leaders of the movement or victims. Thus, signals of social connection are not ones that suggest mere group membership, but instead offer some sense that the politician will be committed to the racial group and can be held accountable to the group should they deviate from expectations. The grouped nature of the Black racial group is important to many Black people and has been thoroughly researched through concepts like linked fate and the Black utility heuristic (Gurin et al 1989; Dawson 1994), which speak to how Black people view the political world and themselves as political actors.

Scholarship tells us that being a member of the racial group is really important to many Black people (White and Laird 2020). In particular, Black social networks and social interactions play a strong role in Black people's political behavior because these networks are where enforcement of expectation for group prioritization are mostly likely to occur (White et al. 2014; White and Laird 2020; Wamble et al 2022). Those Black individuals with Black social networks are more likely to feel the racialized social constraint of group prioritization than those who do not. This is made more apparent when looking at the difference between Black men and women; Black women, whose social networks tend to be blacker than their Black male counterparts, are more likely to adhere to

the expectations of the racial group, which is made evident by their stronger affiliation with the Democratic Party (Laird and Wamble n.d).

Social Connection & Potential Commitment

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, these social connection signals should communicate a *potential commitment* as well as an *accountability mechanism*. If a candidate is unable to meet Black individuals' expectations by showing a realized commitment through signals of personal sacrifice, Black voters will want information about whether the candidate is committed to prioritizing the group. I argue further that because personal sacrifice signals suggest an understanding of the social accountability structure which ensures, through social sanctions, that the group is prioritized, if there is no sense that a representative understands, through past actions, what the group expects, there will be questions about their commitment as well as their accountability. Black voters will, as a result, look for an indication that, should the candidate deviate from the expected behavior, they can be sanctioned and will be responsive to it.

By communicating the potential commitment through a connection to the racial group, I posit that social connection signals illustrate an awareness of the norms by way of having contact with racial group members or prominent institutions. As such, I contend that, in addition to looking for signals of commitment, Black voters whose potential representatives use social connection signals will evaluate the candidate both on their perceived commitment as well as their connection to the racial group; this suggests understanding of the consequences they would face, namely social sanctions, should their potential commitment not be realized.

An example of social connection signaling is found in Senator Obama's 2008 speech on race where he cites the "blood of slaves" that runs through the veins of his wife and daughters (Obama 2008). During his campaign, one of the prevalent critiques raised against Senator Obama was his experiential distance from the African American community's problems. As he was born of an

African immigrant father and raised by a white mother and grandparents, many within the black community perceived that he was detached from the "African American experience," which is strongly influenced by its roots in slavery. To combat this critique, Obama used the fact that his wife had the traditional African American experience to convey his connection to the struggles of the Black community through her experience. Fraser (2009) writes, "[w]hile Obama's background may have been difficult for many [B]lack voters to identify with, his wife Michelle's more conventional background made her a key voice in speaking to African-American communities" (23). Here we see Black voters looking to the social connection Barack Obama had with his wife, whose experience as a Black woman growing up in Chicago felt more in line with the experiences of many other Black American voters. I contend that many felt that not only would Barack Obama be more inclined to be committed to the group because of her, but that should he deviate from the expectations of the group, she would keep him in line.

Former New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio employed a similar signaling practice often showing his ability to be held accountable to the racial group by employing social connection community commitment signals that referenced his wife, Chirlane McCray, a Black woman, and their bi-racial children, Dante and Chiara. Bill de Blasio's use of his family as signals to the black community that he could be held accountable played a large role in his success in gaining 96% of the Black vote (Grynbaum 2013). Indeed, one writer wrote "In the Bronx, some African-American voters defaulted to a shorthand: 'the man with the [B]lack wife'," and quoted another black individual from Harlem who said, "[w]hen people saw his family, they felt, 'Here is someone who understands and relates to me on a level on which I can be comfortable'" (Grynbaum 2013).

These quotes show that many Black New Yorkers saw de Blasio's Black family members as a sign that he would be able to understand their perspectives and experiences. In a piece about his

family, particularly Ms. McCray, and the role she played in informing perceptions of deBlasio the author writes,

> "The central role of Ms. McCray, who Mr. de Blasio has declared will be a significant figure in his administration, also buoyed those who felt previous mayors simply did not have a direct connection to African-Americans. 'You have a black woman sitting there who can say, 'My side of the family is hurting over here, now.' He's going to hear that direct," said Walter Edwards, a real estate developer in Harlem. "He's not going to get it from somebody off the street he has no relationship with" (Grynbaum 2013).

Many took de Blasio's marriage to a Black woman to mean that he would meet the goals and expectations of the Black community because de Blasio's family, in particular his wife, can voice the community's concerns and see to it that he addresses them. Black voters saw Bill de Blasio's marriage and perceived that because of his social tie to the community, he would be held accountable when his wife's "family is hurting." The passages also suggest the assumption that the direct connection he has with his wife holds more weight than any other relationship with Black individuals he might have were he not married to her.

The examples above point to a reality faced by those politicians whose commitment and accountability are not made inherently clear to Black voters. Both Obama and de Blasio answered those questions by highlighting their connections to the group through anecdotes about their familial relations. Their use of these connections to these individuals were, I posit, made to show not only that they have an incentive to care about the issues that affect the racial group, but also that they have clear accountability structures to ensure that they remain committed to better the racial group. In other words, by highlighting these social connections, both men were able to show that they had a vested, personal interest in making sure the Black community's needs were prioritized.

The Influence of Candidate Identity on Community Commitment Signaling

Much of what I argue in this manuscript is built on the premise that the Black community's social dynamics play an integral role in their political behavior and subsequent expectations. Existing work has offered a theoretical and empirical foundation by showing the way that Black people use their social interactions as a way to enforce norms and expectations (Walton 1987; White et al 2014; White and Laird 2020). It is from this preface that I contend that similar expectations are leveraged against political representatives seeking to gain support from Black voters, hence their desire for community commitment.

While the framework presented above speaks to Black voters' general desire for community commitment, it is not my contention that signals of personal sacrifice and/or social connection will be evaluated equally. As alluded to in the descriptive representation literature the race and gender of the candidate will matter. The expectation for prioritizing the racial group's interest is not being enforced in a socio-political vacuum. Indeed, Black voters, like all voters, arrive at their evaluative process with priors about how a candidates' identity might inform their ability to meet the group's expectations, in this case showing commitment to placing the group's interest above their own. Put another way, the desire for community commitment is not unaffected by external social influences such as a candidate's race and/or gender. I posit that while these social dynamics are often found in an intraracial settings, they are not confined to just Black people nor are all Black people, regardless of their gender expression, uniformly assessed. Black people's socialization and interactions with Black and white women and men are going to play an important part in how the community commitment signaling framework operates. Perhaps not in the desire for community commitment signals themselves, but rather in the efficacy of the signals.

As shown in the previous chapter, Black people's relationship with gender and race have varied over time with Black and white men and women playing various roles in both the elevation and oppression of the racial group. As I posited in chapter 1, so much of the understandings of

commitment and sacrifice that Black voters allow to impact their contemporary political expectations of representatives have their roots in their historical experiences. Thus, how Black people think about the role of gender or race within social contexts make a difference in how they perceive and evaluate candidates based on the community commitment signals they employ.

Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined my community commitment signaling framework. I began with a discussion of the importance and influence of the Civil Rights Movement, which built on chapter 1's historical description of the movement and its leaders. I argue that the actions and sacrifices taken by civil rights activists dramatically changed the lived experience of Black people throughout the country, and particularly in the South, leading to a massive increase in the number of registered Black voters and, in turn, the number of Black elected officials. Many of those elected officials became among the first same race representatives whom Black voters supported. This, I argued, set the stage for how Black individuals would come to understand effective political representation. I take this reality to provide an explanation for why, per the work of David Canon (1999), representatives with backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement are preferable to those whose strategies rely on other things. The actions of the civil rights activists turned politicians also mirror the actions of many within the Black community and their desire for others within the racial group to prioritize its interest lest they be subject to social sanctions. This structure is embodied in the sacrifices many people made during the Civil Rights Movement where their well-being was often put in danger.

However, this preference leads us to larger questions about the continued importance of the Civil Rights Movement some 50 years later for Black voters, and how politicians without backgrounds in the movement can garner favor and support from Black voters. I provide the community commitment signaling framework as an answer to this query, and assert that candidates

without backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement can employ similar strategies, and send signals of personal sacrifice or social connections to communicate a commitment to the Black community and its interests as their civil rights predecessors had.

Drawing on signaling theory, I explain that each of these signals conveys a different degree of commitment to placing the group first. I assert that community commitment signaling is used by politicians to convey that they are committed to prioritizing the racial group's interest. I go on to say that these signals serve as a mechanism explaining why some politicians are viewed as more preferable than others. Community commitment offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Black voters and representatives by focusing on how Black voters respond to variations in signals used by politicians. Those politicians whose community commitment signals communicate a stronger commitment to the group are prized over those whose signals may leave Black voters wondering about their commitment and accountability.

Those politicians who signal a realized commitment through signals of personal sacrifice will be more positively evaluated than those who rely on signals of social connections whose commitment and accountability are less easily discerned. Like a potential employer seeking out qualified candidates for a job, Black voters' seeking out a representative lean more heavily towards one whose commitment has been proven. In this chapter, I contend that the perceptions of a candidate's commitment will lead to changes in how Black voters evaluate them and their willingness to support them. This is because, while there have been numerous changes in the lived experiences of Black people in both the political and social arenas, their expectations for those who seek to represent them, remain unchanged. Black people have a clear understanding of what commitment for the group can do, and seek out candidates who will continue to place the group's interests first.

Existing literature uses partisanship and race as the two most prominent explanations of Black voter candidate preference, but most of that work draws those conclusions based on observational data wherein Black voters are evaluating individuals for whom they have already voted. While this method is helpful in providing clear evidence of Black voters' preference for Black candidates, and that those who are represented by co-racial politicians are more politically engaged and empowered, it is more difficult to ascertain how the candidates in those studies were able to successfully get Black support or why they were chosen in the first place. By leveraging experimental methods and signaling theory, my community commitment signaling framework overcomes this endogeneity problem, and offers some of the first insights into how Black voters' perceptions of representatives have and have not changed over time.

Importantly, community commitment signaling gives voice to the expectations of Black voters and the structures that tend to govern their day-to-day lives, and extends it to how they engage with those who seek to represent them, an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship between Black voters and politicians. This framework offers a look at the antecedents of Black voter candidate selection, which potentially explains why the candidates who are often seen in the data as being effective representatives of Black voters, both symbolically and substantively, behave the way they do. It is because Black voters are strategic at the onset in their selection of these candidates who later become the incumbents that they evaluate in datasets like the National Black Election Studies of 1984 and 1988 and others.

By relying on the conventional wisdom of political discourse and scholarly work that partisanship and race are the primary mechanisms at work, the strategic nature with which Black people approach candidate selection is ignored. It is replaced with an overly simplistic political calculus that amounts to "if you look like me, you will get my vote." However, it is clear in many situations in which Black candidates were unsuccessful in garnering Black support or in which white

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Democrats failed that Black voters rely on more than race and/or party to make these choices. Understanding the nuance of that decision-making offers scholars, pundits, and candidates the ability to effectively appeal to Black voters in meaningful ways.

One of the bigger points that we, as scholars and citizens, drastically oversimplify is how sophisticated Black voters are in their behavior. Black voters have effectively created a system wherein they are able to, at least in part, select candidates who they can hold accountable in ways that they know to be effective, and which operates outside of the formal political space as to make its power more effectively felt. To be outside of the political expectations of the group is to be outside of the group's good graces (see Kanye West and Chrisette Michele). One could claim that Black candidates have this connection or intrinsic motivation to support the group, but is that motivation something that is inherent to Black representatives? Or is it because Black voters chose those candidates who communicated a commitment, and thus the intrinsic motivation they show in office was observed through commitment signaling and prized by Black voters, leading them to support the candidate?

Black voters know that every Black candidate does not have a strong commitment to furthering the interests of the Black community, which is why Black voters optimize their decision making and their candidate selection by choosing those who communicate the strongest commitment to the group. It is this process of optimization that, I argue, leads to the outcomes we see in existing work concerning the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation. We have been missing the intermediate mechanism to explain why this connection exists and is so strong; it is because Black people have been making strategic choices regarding whom they put into office.

Existing work does not give us the ability to understand why, in some instances in which Black voters could have chosen Black candidates, they chose a white candidate. This theoretical

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framework opens up our ability to think about and better intuit why candidates make certain kinds of appeals to Black voters. Why would Jon Ossoff align himself with the late John Lewis in a general election to gain Black votes? Why would Raphael Warnock display himself in the housing projects he grew up in, or leverage his connection to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? The community commitment signaling framework tells us that all of these appeals are meant to communicate a social connection to the racial group, and an understanding of the expectations of costly behavior for the sake of improving the group's societal position. Ultimately, the community commitment signaling framework broadens our understanding not only of the behavioral aspects of Black voters, but also of why political candidates and politicians are choosing to appeal to Black voters in specific ways. They know what Black voters are looking for; however, none of that nuance, understanding, or strategy is captured in the conventional wisdom which elevates race and party as the chief mechanisms to explain Black candidate support and preference.

The next four chapters test the framework using observational datasets with oversamples of Black individuals and novel experiments that leverage Democratic primaries to optimize the visibility of community commitment signaling by allowing for both race and party, two important considerations used by Black voters, to be held constant. Chapter 3 makes the case for community commitment signaling as a necessary tool for understanding Black voters' candidate selection despite the bevy of work done on how Americans arrive at their assessments of politicians. Chapters 4 through 6 will investigate how community commitment operates and its generalizability to non-Black candidates, respectively. These experiments allow us to see how community commitment signaling affects the way that Black voters evaluate candidates based on the kind of signal to which they are exposed.

The rest of the book investigates and shows how community commitment looks in the real world and provides evidence of its importance in the voting calculus of Black people. It also offers

strong evidence attesting to the importance of experiments in isolating the causal mechanism which explains, even if only in part, candidate preferability amongst Black voters, which has thus far yet to be done.

The Nuances in Black Voters' Candidate Selection Process

If we accept and acquiesce in the face of discrimination, we accept the responsibility ourselves and allow those responsible to salve their conscience by believing that they have our acceptance and concurrence. We should, therefore, protest openly everything… that smacks of discrimination or slander. ―

Mary McLeod Bethune

In the previous chapters, I discussed the conventional belief that Black voters will offer strong support to Black politicians over white ones. While there have been historical instances where Black politicians have been successful in garnering support from same race constituents, much of this belief rose to the forefront of modern political discourse following the success of Barack Obama during his 2008 and 2012 presidential bids. Public discourse is not the only place where this preconceived idea about the role of race in Black political behavior exists. Indeed, many scholars have alluded to the notion based on compelling empirical evidence that Black Democratic politicians are, relative to their white counterparts, more preferred. However, just as there are numerous examples discussed in the introductory chapter that highlight the nuances of race within the context of Black people choosing who they will support, this chapter will show that there is evidence in existing data that shows that Black voters' use of race goes beyond an assessment of physical similarity to make their electoral choice.

The underlying assessment of Black voters' candidate selection in the public conversations suggests that voting for someone "because they are Black" or "because they look like you" is a simplistic act of the politically unaware. Similarly, in much of the work on American's candidate selection process, scholarship implies that the use of race, tends to be used by those who lack political sophistication and/or are in low information environments. Both the scholarly and public engagement with the role of race in candidate selection presumes that race is merely physical aspect