

We Choose Who? Examining Black Voters' Candidate Preference & Selection

Julian J Wamble
George Washington University

Abstract

Conclusions drawn from descriptive representation research have led some within the scholarly and punditry worlds to assume that when a Black politician runs for office, Black voters will support them. However, recent elections have shown that Black voters' calculus goes beyond having a representative that looks like them, prompting the question this paper investigates- What considerations, outside of race, partisanship, and gender, are Black voters using to choose certain representatives over others? I argue and prove, using a novel theoretical framework and original experimental test on approximately 2100 Black respondents, that Black voters prefer a politician, regardless of their race, who proves their commitment to prioritizing the racial group's interest through personal sacrifice. This study highlights the sophisticated process of Black voter candidate selection, expands understandings of identity's role in the representative/constituent paradigm, and provides a framework through which scholars can investigate the candidate preferability for other identity groups.

Traditionally, when scholars examine the influence of a representative’s race on Black voters’ candidate preference, they find that Black voters definitively prefer same race representatives over others. Using data from the 1996 National Black Elections Study, Table 1 clearly illustrates this across numerous outcomes where Black voters offer more positive evaluations of Black representatives over non-Black representatives. In other studies, Black voters’ preference manifests in increases in communication with their descriptive representative (Broockman 2014), political knowledge, empowerment, and willingness to engage the political system (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Lublin 1999; Tate 2004; Gleason and Stout 2014; Stout 2015). Specifically, Katherine Tate (2004) suggests that Black voters’ strong preference for Black politicians stems from the perception that they are more trustworthy, helpful, and hand-on in their districts than their White counterparts (see also Mansbridge 1999 and Stout 2018). These findings might suggest that Black voters’ preference for certain candidates is born out of physical similarity and shared experience.

Table 1. Evaluations of their Congressional Representatives by Legislator Race and Partisanship

	Republicans & Democrats		Just Democrats	
	Non- Black	Black	Non-Black	Black
Good at keeping in Touch (% Good)	59	84**	65	84**
Candidate Helpfulness (% Very Helpful)	22	46**	27	46**
Prestige Seeking vs. Problem Solver (% Problem Solver)	39	72**	53	72**
Candidate Approval (% Approve)	68	84**	79	84

Source: 1996 National Black Election Study;

Note: ** p<.00; *p<.05; All tests are two-tailed and comparing Black and Non-Black politicians’ evaluations.

However, recent elections within Black politics suggest that the presumptions drawn from the descriptive representation literature, along with real-world events like the strong Black support for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, do not fully encapsulate the breadth and complexity of Black voter

candidate preferability. Indeed, Table 2 complicates the assumptions about Black behavior as it shows that, across time and numerous large-N Black datasets that most Black voters do not believe in always voting for Black candidates. Electoral outcomes in recent elections suggests that these findings have some merit as Black politicians who were set to make history failed to obtain the expected amount of Black support (see Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, Artur Davis, Anthony Brown and Benjamin Jealous). Conversely, existing frameworks cannot explain why White politicians like Memphis Representative Steve Cohen and Joe Biden have been able to attain and maintain Black support despite being challenged by well-known and viable Black candidates (Brown 2009; Stafford & Fingerhut 2020).

Table 2. Belief that Black voters should always vote for Black candidates

“Black voters should always vote for Black candidates when they run?”
(% who agree)

Survey	Percentage
1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans (Wave 1)	40
1984 National Black Election Study	18
1988 National Black Election Study	25
1991 Black American Perspectives, The Future of the Civil Rights	21
1992 National Survey of Black Americans (Wave 4)	34
1996 National Black Election Study	39
2001-2003 National Survey of American Life	16
2012 Outlook on Life Surveys	16

Attempts to reconcile these unanticipated failures and successes with existing literature on the factors Black voters consider exposes a puzzle in the relationship Black voters have with political representatives. Are the affective and political attachments Black voters have to Black representatives unique because of the shared experiences and similar physical features? Or are Black voters attaching themselves to representatives based on criterion that goes beyond skin color, and Black representatives are simply more likely to meet this criterion, making them the more apparent recipients of the affective rewards associated with descriptive representation? In this article, I address this puzzle by providing a framework to better understand the mechanisms underneath Black voter candidate selection by asking-

What considerations, beyond skin color and partisanship, do Black individuals make when choosing to support certain representatives over others?

I argue that their 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.¹ Representatives seeking Black voter support must communicate this commitment to Black voters by sending certain signals. I offer my *community commitment signaling theoretical framework*, which claims that representatives make rhetorical appeals to the racial group that contain an underlying message of their commitment to prioritizing the Black community's political interests. This framework draws on signaling theory and 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 and Laird 2020). 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 an experimental test, I find that Black voters' preference for group prioritization is not confined to same race candidates. Indeed, when a Black or White candidate signals past actions of sacrificing their well-being for the Black community, they are consistently seen as more committed to the group and evaluated more positively.

Black Americans are 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

¹ 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. That said, scholars do assert that most Black voters tend to support institutions and individuals that are perceived to be "advancing Black interests" (Dawson 1995; 97).

arenas (Dawson 1995), the use of race as the lens through which they view the political world (Walton 1985; Dawson 1995), and a strong and consistent leaning towards the Democratic Party (White and Laird 2020) 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 into the candidate selection processes for other groups who have less cohesion on social and political dimensions (i.e. women, Latinx, LGBTQ+ voters).

Within the realm of Black political behavior, establishing community commitment as a mechanism provides a unique and strong contribution by showing the sophisticated and strategic nature with which Black voters choose their political representatives. By using a mechanism that is borne out of the group's social norms and expectations Black voters are better able to optimize the kind of representative they get at the onset of an election, as opposed to waiting to hold them accountable only after they are in office. This work also offers scholars a way to examine the preferences of Black voters outside the descriptive representation paradigm as the findings suggest that the expectations Black voters have for those who seek to represent them are not confined to same race representatives.

Descriptive Representation: Finding the Mechanism

Some important works have laid the groundwork for understanding what may make certain representatives more preferable to Black voters. Dovi (2002) pushes scholars to acknowledge that all descriptive representatives are not equal theorizes preferable Black descriptive representatives are those that are seen as "one of us," but I contend that the notion of being "one of us" is not zero-sum, and the way of candidate communicates their belonging will matter for how they are viewed. Stout (2015) makes similar claims 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 finding 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. In his seminal study Canon (1999) shows how Black representative represent white constituents. He shows that there are two different kinds of Black politicians with different governing perspectives. He suggests that traditional Black politicians with roots in the Civil Rights Movement are preferred by Black voters more than their coalition building counterparts. But does not explain why traditional Black leaders are preferred meaning even though we know who Black voters prefer we still are lacking the mechanism that explains why.

Some might suggest turning to policy to find a mechanism. Indeed, there is prominent body of work that shows the importance of descriptive representation for better substantive representation (Whitby 1997; Lublin 1999; Grose 2011). Though these studies provide important information about the relationship between substantive and descriptive representation, scholarship also tells us that most elections occur in low information environments where general knowledge of bills passed is minimal amongst the American electorate (Lupia 1994; Tate 2004; Griffin and Flavin 2007). Moreover, multiple studies have shown that when asked to rank a representative's activities in terms of their perceived importance, Black voters consistently ranks policy is among the lowest priorities for many Black voters (Fenno 2003; Tate 2004; Griffin and Flavin 2011; Harden 2015; Hayes 2016). This is not to say that Black voters do not care about policy but rather that they tend to have greater concern for other aspects of representation. Thus, investigating policy preference and congruence as a mechanism may not offer a direct understanding of the mechanisms that Black voters rely on to support a candidate.

As such, I turn to contemporary research about how Black voters used, and continue to use, social interactions to ensure strong political cohesion amongst fellow group members (White and Laird 2020). Much of this research is focuses on how the social accountability structure within which many

Blacks used social sanctions to keep individuals from choosing self-interest over group interest. I contend that understanding how Black people's use of social interactions with one another informs their expectations with potential representatives is a fruitful place to investigate Black political considerations of candidates.

The Social Accountability Structure & Black Voter Expectations

To understand how Black individuals' social interactions inform their political behaviors and expectations comes from, I turn to the research tells us that, during the long period of political exclusion, Black voters were not politically dormant. Instead, “[B]lacks [sought] consciously through communication to produce not only a group awareness but also an internalization or active sharing of interests within the group strong enough to encourage them to coordinate their behavior in pursuit of common interests” (Walton 1985; 61). White and Laird (2020) call this the “social accountability structure.”

In this social model of politics, organizations like the Black church and the Black press fostered an understanding amongst many Black individuals that in order to bring about racial equality the group's interest needed to be prioritized. However, there was an understanding by those in positions of power that the Black community is not a monolith and, despite knowing the norms and expectations of the group, some Black individuals would benefit from making decisions based on their individual interests. To combat this potential inclination, scholars tell us, Black individuals used social sanctions, like public ridicule and stereotyping on those who were seen as acting against the racial group, to ensure a commitment to prioritizing the Black community's interest. (Walton 1985; White and Laird 2020). As such, the use of social sanctions maintained a commitment to the community and placing its interest first for those who might be advantaged by deviating from that norm.

In their numerous experiments across various studies, White and Laird (2020) show that the internalized aspects of the social accountability structure discussed by Walton (1985) remain potent influencers on the political behavior of Black individuals. They consistently find that the influence of

social sanctions is most pronounced in their affiliation with the Democratic Party. When in the presence of a racial in-group member, Black individuals are more likely to claim a stronger affiliation with the Democratic Party and less likely to donate to Republican candidates even when doing so means gaining monetary compensation. These results show that the social accountability structure and the use of sanctions to hold each other accountable to the norms of placing the group's interest first is still a significant part of Black political behavior.

Civil Rights Politicians & Black Voter Political Expectations

I contend that in the same way Black individuals expect each other to not only be aware but committed to placing the group's interests first, they look for that same commitment in their elected representatives. In fact, they may expect a clearer commitment to the group interests from their political representatives because of their heightened status as representatives of the group (Frimer and Skitka 2020). In addition to holding representatives to a higher standard, many of the expectations of commitment to Black interests that Black voters have for their political representatives were epitomized by the civil rights activists many of whom became among the first political representatives for whom many Black individuals voted. (Ardrey and Nelson 1990).

Not only do they have high expectations by they have seen the expectations met by politicians, which I argued their expectations for political representatives. I contend that Black voters' notions of effective political leadership are informed by their socialized association of civil rights politicians and their sacrifices for the racial group. This contention might explain the work of David Canon (1999) who finds that Black politicians with roots in the Civil Rights Movement, tend to have greater electoral success with Black voters. This success, I argue, is borne out of traditional Black politicians' clear commitment to making the interests of the racial group their primary concern, and showing that to Black voters through their sacrifices during the Civil Rights Movement.

However, the face of Black political representation is changing (Gillespie 2010; Tate 2010). As traditional Black politicians begin to leave office and are replaced by younger more professionalized

Black representatives without the history of being active in the Civil Rights Movement. This transition in Black political representation begs the question-by what means do non-Civil Rights politicians communicate their commitment to making the group's interests their primary political concern? To do this, politicians should employ what I call *community commitment signals*, which are rhetorical claims of personal sacrifice or social connection that communicate their commitment to prioritizing the group's interests.

Signaling Theory & Community Commitment

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 2002). Scholars of signaling theory use the example of an individual putting their education level on a job resume to communicate their competency for a position. Their education level may not explicitly indicate whether they have the specific skills for the job to which they are applying, but it does show their aptitude to learn the necessary skills (Spence 1973). 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 for needs to be something that is recognizable to the receiver.

Within signaling theory, there are signalers, signals, and receivers. Upon the receipt of the signal, receivers determine of the signaler's credibility based on perceptions of the signals' costliness. The costlier a signal, the more likely the signal is perceived to be credible (Bird and Smith 2005). In applying this theory to the framework of voter candidate preferability, the signals used by politicians, who are the signalers, are used to communicate the candidate's ability and likelihood of meeting the expectations of their constituents.

Black Voters & Community Commitment Signals

Based on the social accountability structure within which many Black voters operate, a strong signal of credibility is one that shows a representative not only understands the group norm is 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, seek signals of community commitment to the group's interest from the signalers, or political representatives.

Thus, the signals non-Civil Rights politicians have to send are ones that effectively communicate a commitment to prioritizing the Black community's interest. 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. Even though these individuals are leaving office, I posit that it is their actions that made them more preferable, and those can be replicated by those with that background.

I draw on the experiences of Civil Rights politicians. In this paper, I focus on two signals that scholars of the Civil Rights Movement point to as staples of civil rights activists- *social connections* and *personal sacrifices*.² These are signals, I argue, that are recognizable to Black voters because of their socialization about the importance of Civil Rights Movement (Morris et al. 1989; Deane et al. 2016), the collective memory of the movement and its influence on their social and political livelihoods that many Blacks still have (Harris 2006), and the pictures and narratives of the leaders' sacrifices can often be found in campaign and mobilization materials (Johnson 2014; Booker 2019).

Community Commitment Signals

² 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.

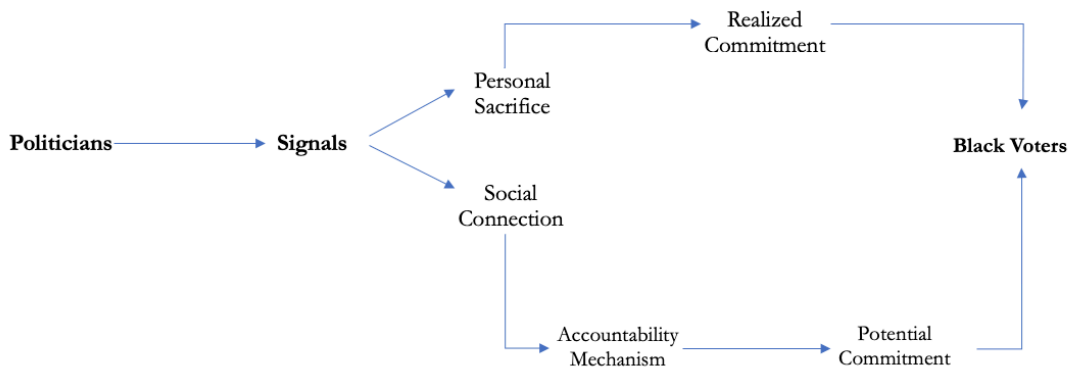


Figure 1. An Illustration of the Community Commitment Signaling Framework

Srivastava (2001) explains that all signals do not communicate the same level of underlying cost and credibility. In the case of Black voter candidate preferability, means that 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, as illustrated in Figure 1. 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 more preferable as they suggest a greater level of commitment than those signals whose cost are perceived to be lower. As shown in Figure 1, the underlying information communicated by personal sacrifice community commitment signals is a realized commitment to placing the group’s interest first. On the other hand, the information conveyed by social connection community commitment signals suggests a potential commitment to prioritizing the group’s interests.

Personal Sacrifice

Sociologist Robb Willer (2009) corroborates the claims made by scholars of signaling theory about the importance of a signal’s perceived cost. Within the context of the community commitment signaling framework, I contend that politicians who communicate a *realized commitment* through references to past instances where they have put their well-being in jeopardy for the sake of greater inclusion political and social spaces are more effective in signaling the likelihood of staying committed. 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 more preferred because they have provided evidence of their commitment. In the unique historical narrative of Black Americans, the sacrifices made by civil rights activists and politicians led to meaningful and drastic changes in the position of many Black individuals (Holt et al. 2000). Thus, Black people's understanding of personal sacrifice is that it is not only costly but effective which, I posit, makes the potency of personal sacrifice signals, and the power of realized commitment, greater and more desirable.

Social Connection

Every politician does not have personal sacrifice in their narrative, but can, I contend, still show some level of commitment, it simply might not be as effective in showing their ability to meet Black voters' expectations (Srivastava 2001). Those politicians who cannot reference past sacrifices for the racial group can use their connection to the racial group as a way to communicate their *potential commitment* to the racial group. By communicating a connection to the racial group, I posit that social connections signal an awareness of the norms and by way of having contact with group member or prominent institutions. The inability to reference past actions that the individuals can point to means that Black voters have less proof that the politicians relying on these signals are likely to pay the costs associated with placing the group's interest before their own. As such, I contend the kind of social connection invoked by the politicians also conveys an understanding of the consequences they would face, namely social sanctions, should their potential commitment to ensuring the group's political needs are met is not realized.

Why Sacrifice Is More Effective

Of the two community commitment signals outlined above, I contend that Black voters are more likely to perceive commitment and positively evaluate politicians when they show a realized commitment to the racial group through the usage of personal sacrifice signals. Existing work generally

affirms this expectation by noting that Black voters tend to have a stronger preference for those with backgrounds in the Civil Rights Movement (Canon 1999; Gillespie 2010). However, research does not explain why this preference exists leaving questions about whether its persistence will continue as Black voters' formal political engagement has increased and the number of Black politicians of the civil rights era continues to decrease. Despite Black voters' recognition that the past sacrifices of civil rights activists turned politicians, like John Lewis, Eleanor Holmes Norton, and others led to a colossal shift in their lives, their experiences within formalized contemporary political space remains riddled with pandering, revocation of rights and access, and broken promises culminating in significantly lower amounts of political trust (Putnam 2000; Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 1995; Nunnally 2012; Mangum 2012; Avery 2006; Avery 2009).

I contend that, for many Black voters, the need for strong, unassailable signals of commitment from those seeking to represent them remains in the wake of their continued quest for socio-political equity. In their desire to optimize their electoral power through representation, Black voters prefer candidates whose commitment is made the clearest through sacrifice. If a politician is willing to put their well-being in jeopardy for the sake of the racial group's socio-political inclusion, Black individuals can have greater confidence that the politician will prioritize the group's interest above their own prestige. The realized commitment conveyed through personal sacrifice signals provides a reference that the politician has already proven themselves committed and will be more likely to engage in costly behavior for the group in the future. This appraisal offers concrete evidence for Black voters upon which to base their assessments of the candidate's commitment, and helps them overcome skepticism that the politician may forego the group's desires for their own. Black voters can worry less about a candidate's commitment when their past speaks for their present and future as a representative of the racial group's interest.

Methods

In order to overcome the problems of past models that suffer from endogeneity problems, and to offer deeper methodological insights into how community commitment serves as a mechanism to explain Black voters' candidate evaluation, I run an experiment where I subtly vary how the candidate signals commitment to placing the group's interest first. If, as I argue, the community commitment mechanism is used by Black individuals as a pre-election filter to optimize their political representation, the methodological test investigating the mechanism should be one that examines how Black voters evaluate a candidate based on their signaling before they get into office.

Experimental Design

The goal of this experiment is to show the existence and influence of community commitment. To achieve this goal, I set the experiment in the context of a Congressional Democratic primary election in which the race, partisan affiliation, and in this case gender of the candidate sending the signals are the same across the treatments. In other electoral contexts where the race and/or party of the candidate may be different from one another, it would be easy to attribute the findings of more positive evaluations to sharing a race or partisan identity with them. Thus, setting this experimental context in an electoral primary context assists in establishing the existence and influence of community commitment.³

In the experimental treatments, participants are shown an USA Today article about a Democratic congressional hopeful, Reginald, whose picture is displayed in the article (see the appendix) as either a Black or white man who speaks about their decision to run for office. Imbedded in the candidate's statement, and varies based on the condition into which respondents are randomly placed.

³ To be clear, I am not arguing that community commitment signals are only seen in this context; rather, that the ability to hold race, partisanship, and in this case, gender constant provides a clearer picture of community commitment at work in Black voter candidate preferability and selection.

Article Title: Democratic Congressional hopeful announces run in special election				
“Our country is at a tipping point and in need of a change, which is why...”				
Control⁴	Social Connection-Familial	Social Connection-NAACP	Personal Sacrifice-Financial	Personal Sacrifice-Physical
	I, along with my wife, Chiara/husband Darnell, and our children, Dante and Monique, [are]	I am proud of my endorsement from the NAACP because it shows that	I gave up my job at a prominent law firm to work, for less pay, as a lawyer for racial equality organizations.	despite the rubber bullets and pepper spray often used against me and others in the protests against racial injustice, I always stood my ground.
<p>...am dedicated to doing whatever is necessary to bring about this much needed change.</p> <p>That statement comes from Regina[ld] Williams, 42, who was asked why (s)he decided to run against numerous Democratic contenders in the special election for a seat in the House of Representatives.</p> <p>The election is due to take place early next year. More as this story develops...”</p>				

Table 3. Language in Experimental Conditions

Operationalizing Community Commitment Signaling

Control Condition

The language in the control condition is meant to simulate a deracialized appeal that has grown in popularity amongst candidates, particularly Black ones seeking white support. Thus, the statement in the control condition employs no kind of signal of the candidates’ commitment to placing the needs of the Black community above their own. Instead, the statement offers the ability to compare the counterfactual argument and the conventional wisdom that being Black is enough for a candidate to garner support from Black voters to the usage of different forms of community commitment.

Social Connection Conditions

⁴The language in the control, where the candidate does not include any appeal, is simply the language written out in the rows above and below the community commitment treatment language.

Those respondents in either of the social connection treatments rely on their connections to individuals (in this case their wife and children), which we saw and continue to see as an appeal leveraged by politicians like Kamala Harris, Barack Obama, Cory Booker, and Bill deBlasio. Some leveraged their parents' accomplishments and others their spousal connections to the Black community.⁵ Other politicians often promote their connection to the racial group by touting their connection to prominent Black institutions, like the NAACP to show their care and concern for the racial group. Both of these signals reveal not only a connection but also some level of personal accountability.

In this experimental design, the candidate offers a community commitment signal of social connection will see an acknowledgement of a connection that is either to individuals, in this case the candidate's spouse Chiara/Darnell and their children⁶, or an institution, the NAACP. I argue that these connections communicate an understanding, through the connection, of the social accountability structure and the need to communicate a commitment. But, because their commitment to prioritizing the group's interest is not yet realized, they have to show, if only implicitly, they are accountable and sanctionable, either by one's family or an organization, should they deviate from the group's norms.

Personal Sacrifice Conditions

To operationalize the personal sacrifice signals, I drew on qualitative responses from Black respondents as well as the profiles of Civil Rights Movement activists and the financial and physical sacrifices they made during their time in the movement (Chong 1999; Williams 2007). In a sample of approximately 525 respondents were asked what it meant to sacrifice for the Black community, and

⁵ The choice to focus on spousal connection instead of broader familial connection was motivated by its prominence in our contemporary political moment with politicians like Obama and deBlasio making strong references to their families during campaigns.

⁶ These names were pre-tested to ensure that respondents gleaned the race of the individual based solely on their name. 70% of a sample of 2500 Black individuals perceived Darnell as Black. 59% perceived Chiara as Black. 67% perceived Dante as a Black person, and 71% perceived Monique to be Black.

nearly 25% of the sample invoked the idea of “giving up” something. One respondent went so far as to say, “Sacrifice generally refers to giving up something valuable, often for a greater purpose or to achieve a particular goal.” Another wrote, “Sacrifice to me means willing to cause yourself to be in a bind just to help someone else.” These sentiments of giving of one’s self for the sake of the racial group are reflected in the actions of many civil rights icons and what I used to inform the experimental treatments.

In the “Personal Sacrifice- Financial” experimental condition, the candidate communicates a realized commitment by explaining that he left a high paying job to work for organizations striving for racial equality. This treatment draws some inspiration from the financial sacrifices made by Barack Obama and Cory Booker. Both Obama and Booker provide examples of financial sacrifice because they are each playing a cost by choosing; in Obama’s case, by choosing not to take a high-paying job despite his educational background, and in Booker’s case, returning back each weekend to an apartment complex where there was often no heat or hot water, though he could have afforded to live in nicer conditions (Jacobs 2006; Kovalski 2008; Gillespie 2012; Gillespie 2019; Grunwald 2019).

Those participants randomly placed into the “Personal Sacrifice- Physical” condition will read the article in which the candidate says that he would not turn his back on Black people because he endured any number physical attacks for the sake of bringing equality to Black people. The sacrifices highlighted in this condition signal are the costliest of the experimental conditions, and the most identifiable with the acts of Civil Rights leaders. Indeed, those leaders were known for putting their lives in danger for attainment of equal rights. The realized accountability in this condition is displayed through the mention of past acts during which the candidate placed their physical well-being in harm’s way.

The hypotheses in Table 6 are derived from of the theoretical tenets of signaling theory, namely that, receivers, Black voters, seek information from potential representatives about their commitment to figure out they credible. Black voters examine the cost embedded within certain signals and the personal sacrifice signals convey a higher cost, requiring the candidate to give up something of their well-being. Moreover, given the reverence many Black individuals have for Civil Rights politicians, and the

understanding that the sacrifices those individuals made led to meaningful changes for the Black community, signals of physical sacrifice that are reminiscent of those actions not only communicate cost, but a greater potential to bring meaningful change to the racial group as well.

Table 4. Hypotheses

<u>Hypothesis #1</u>	Black voters will make more favorable evaluations of Black politicians who use personal sacrifice community commitment signals than Black politicians who do not use a community commitment signal
<u>Hypothesis #2</u>	The candidate who uses the physical sacrifice signal will be evaluated higher than the candidate who uses the financial sacrifice community commitment signal

Sample

This experimental test focuses on the 2,065 self-identified Black respondents who were randomly exposed the Black candidate that were collected in an online quota sample from Qualtrics. As shown in Table 5, this sample is representative relative to other large scale data samples and the census allowing for higher levels of reliability on the data that will be presented.

	Qualtrics Sample	Black Population
Observations (N)	2,065	-
Gender		
Men	990	-
Women	1,075	-
Average Party Identification	69% Democrat	70% Democrat (2016 ANES)
Median Ideology	Slightly Liberal	Slightly Liberal (2016 ANES)
Median Income	\$40,000-49,999	\$40,258 (2017, Census)
Average Education Level	28 % w/ Bachelor's Degree +	22.5% w/ Bachelor's Degree + (2015, Census)

Table 5. Experimental Sample

Outcome Measures

For the purposes of establishing whether respondents gleaned commitment from the appeals made in the experimental treatments, this analysis will focus on the following outcomes:

- **Realized Commitment:** Based on what you have read, how committed would you Reginald Williams **was in his past** to prioritizing the issues that are important to the Black community over gaining more political power?
- **Potential Commitment:** Based on what you have read, how committed would you say Reginald Williams **will be in the future** to prioritizing the issues that are important to the Black community over gaining more political power?
- **Accountability:** How confident are you, if you are at all, that Reginald Williams would change his behavior should members of the Black community voice concerns about how he represented them in office? ⁷
- **Affective Attachment:** This is a composite measure ($\alpha=.81$) of evaluations often discussed in candidate selection literature as well as descriptive representation literature. Included are perceptions of the candidate's ability to represent, his trustworthiness, helpfulness, genuineness of his concern and the respondents' willingness to support him.⁸

Results

As previously stated, the community commitment signaling framework contends that, through rhetorical signals, politicians convey their ability to meet Black voters' expectations of commitment. As per the tenets of signaling theory, the rhetoric used much convey underlying information about one's ability to meet the expectations. Thus, the first portion of my analyses focuses on whether Black individuals actual glean realized or potential commitment from the appeals made by politicians jockeying for their support. Then I will apply my community commitment signaling framework to complicate existing thoughts on the relationship between Black voters and co-racial politicians by showing that the information Black voters take away from candidates' appeals extends beyond the shared phenotypic similarities to the perceptions of accountability and commitment. The results presented are the average effects with the control condition as the baseline (represented by the dashed vertical line in every figure).

⁷ Each of these measures are on a scale of 0-10 with 0 being "Not at all Committed/Confident" and 10 being "Extremely Committed/Confident"

⁸ See appendix for the individual wording for each of these items.

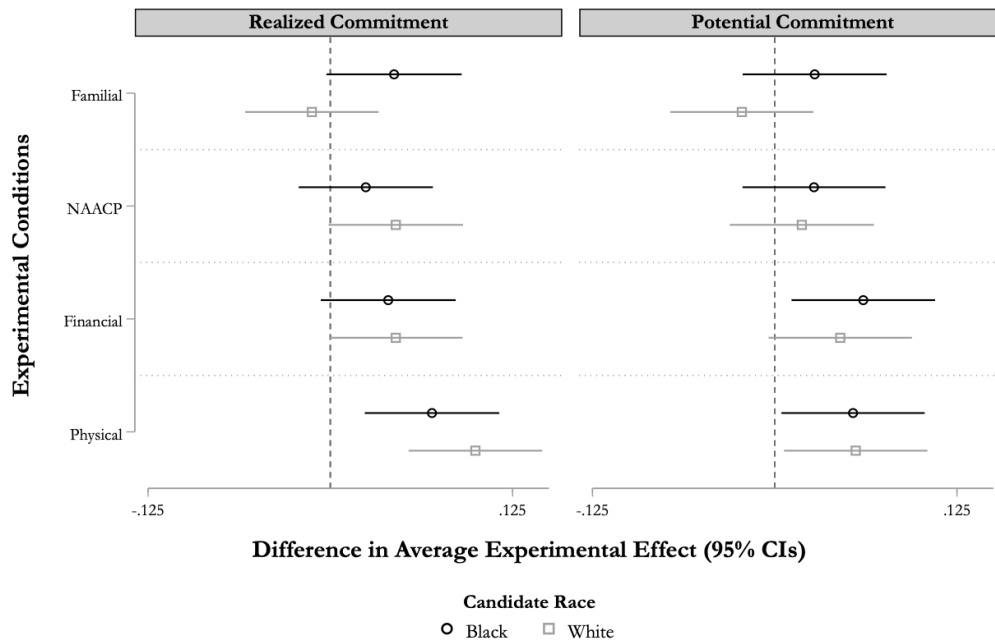


Figure 2. Average Experimental Effects of Community Commitment Signals on Perceptions Reginald Williams’s Realized & Potential Commitment to the Black Community (95% CIs; Baseline- Control Condition); *Note: All significance tests are two-tailed. *= $p < .05$ and relative to the corresponding control in each column*

I begin by looking at the influence of community commitment signals on the perceptions and evaluations of Black men candidates so that we can better understand the nuances with which Black people approach these evaluations. In Figure 2 shows the perceived commitment of the Black candidate based on their community commitment signal. As per Hypothesis 1, I expected that when the politician, regardless of their race, employed a signal that invoked their sacrifice for the Black people Black respondents would perceive higher levels of realized commitment to the racial group relative to those respondents who read an article about Williams where he invoked no commitment to the Black community. Indeed, figure 2 illustrates that Black individuals perceive Reginald Williams’s realized commitment when he employed physical sacrifice signals. This perception persists in their perceptions of his present and future commitments to prioritize the group’s interest. This affirms that Black voters recognize personal sacrifice signals as indicators of a commitment to the community that has already been proven. Importantly, and counter to what existing work might suggest, the perception of Williams’s

realized commitment is apparently whether he is Black or White showing that the preference for commitment supersedes the race of the politician seeking to garner support from Black voters.

Similar evidence is shown for perceptions about the potential that the politician will be committed to prioritizing the interests of the group when he includes discussions of his physical sacrifice relative to those respondents in the control. However, the theorized outcome of the social connections leading Black respondents to believe that Williams will be committed to the racial group in the future are not realized, which could be due to the high bar that Black voters have for those politicians seeking to represent them. It is clear, however, that Black politicians whose appeals include either financial or physical sacrifice are seen a likely to prioritize the needs of Black people in the future ($p < .05$ relative to the control; respectively). For the White politician, the more costly signal of physical sacrifice conveys a similar potential for commitment.

Thus far, I have successfully shown that Black voters do indeed surmise certain information from politicians' appeals, which offers a first step in affirming the prevalence and importance of community commitment signaling for Black voters. Moreover, I have shown that, for certain signals, the influence of the candidate's race does little in the way of altering the influence of the commitment signals or what they convey to Black voters. In short, Black people decipher the language used by politicians to establish whether that person is equipped and willing to put the Black community's needs above their own personal prestige. This is an important finding as it adds a level of nuance to how we understand how Black people use their racial identity to inform their perceptions of politicians.

Much of the work done within the descriptive representation literature focuses on the evaluations on Black men candidates (see Philpot and Walton 2010 for work on Black women's

descriptive representation)⁹, however, these findings clarify that even the assumptions about the commitment among Democratic men politicians, Black or White, leans more heavily on the preference for costly signals to express one’s ability to meet Black expectations of commitment relative to the lack of commitment signaling.

Another expectation of the community commitment signaling framework is that Black individuals desire a politician who can be held accountable to the community in ways that operate outside the normal bounds of political accountability (i.e., not reelecting an unsatisfying politician). Indeed, for those politicians who are unable to use appeals that express an underlying realized commitment, conveying an accountability to the social sanctions of the racial group is paramount. The results for the Black politician show the possibility of being seen as accountable to the racial group when he brings up his family as a social connection relative to when Reginald Williams invoked no community commitment ($p < .05$). This provides some external validity given that we have seen numerous candidates invoke their families as a means of communicating an understanding and commitment to the racial group.

	Black Politician	White Politician
Control	.61 [.58, .65]	.56 [.52, .59]
<u>Social Connection-</u> Familial	.67* [.64, .70]	.54 [.50, .57]
<u>Social Connection-</u> NAACP	.64 [.61, .68]	.57 [.54, .61]

⁹ This scholastic oversight may be due in large part to the fact that there were not many Black women holding elected office during the time the majority of these studies were conducted.

<u>Personal Sacrifice-</u> Financial	.67* [.63, .70]	.60 [.56, .63]
<u>Personal Sacrifice-</u> Physical	.66+ [.63, .70]	.62* [.59, .65]
N	1040	1031

Table 6. Perceived Accountability for Candidate based on Community Commitment Signals;

*Note: All significance tests are derived from two-tailed means tests. + $p < .10$; * $= p < .05$ and relative to the respective control in each column*

The invocation of one's family as a way to bridge that gap between one's lived experience and that of many Black Americans is not new within the American political sphere. Indeed, presidential candidate Obama invoked his wife and daughters as American-born Black individuals in order to highlight his connection to this subsection of the Black community. Indeed, literature affirms that Michelle Obama served as a bridge for Barack Obama in meaningful ways showing that highlighting one's familial connection through signaling can be an effective strategy (Fraser 2009). Moreover, both Cory Book, Kamala Harris, and Bill deBlasio all made similar choices in their respective presidential campaigns (Janes and Weigel 2019; Sanchez 2021; May 2019). This strategy proves to be effective for Black men politicians relative to those who do not use any kind of signal as well as their white counterparts who employ the exact same signal. This affirms my expectations that while Black voters' desire for commitment is not contingent on the politician's racial identity, the starting line from which Black and White politicians start is meaningfully different as made evident by the coefficients in the control condition. Furthermore, the personal sacrifice conditions prove again to be effective in showing a Black politician's accountability while the White politician's accountability is only believed when he employs the costliest of signals ($p < .05$). This provides more evidence that the effect of the community commitment signals may not be substantially different for Black and White politicians but White politicians have a higher bar to clear relative to their Black counterparts.

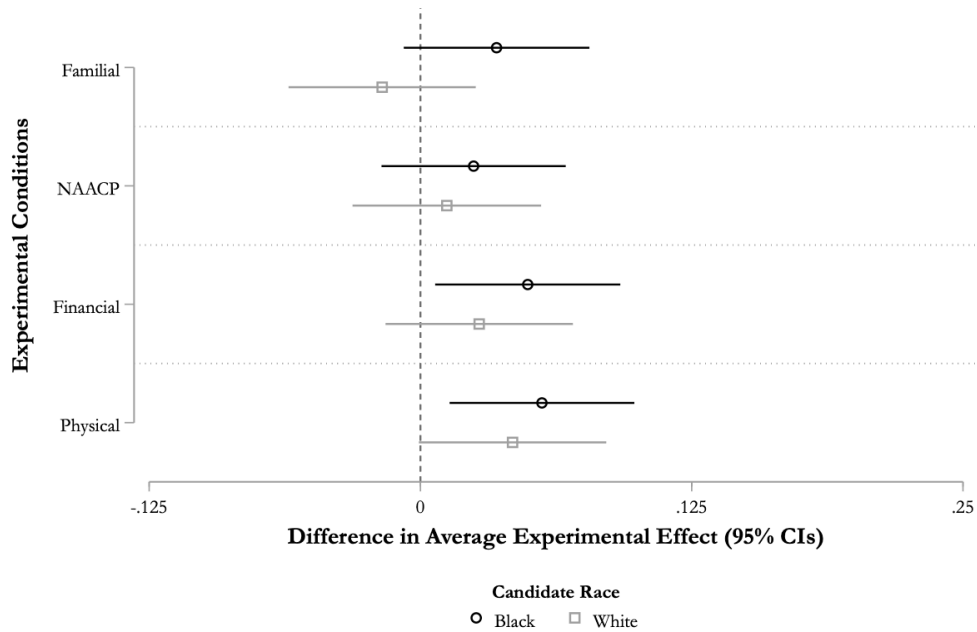


Figure 3. Average Experimental Effects of Community Commitment Signals on Affective Evaluations of Reginald Williams (95% CIs; Baseline- Control Condition)

In Figure 3, the collective evaluations of personal sacrifice treatments, the personal sacrifice signals which the previous findings show communicate a higher level of commitment has led to higher affective evaluations for Reginald Williams when he was presented as a Black man. Traditionally, evaluations like being seen as more likely to represent the group’s interests or being trustworthy have been assumed as for Black Democratic politicians relative to their White counterparts, but figure 3 shows that there is still room to be seen more positively for those politicians who can show their commitment to group prioritization through sacrifice.

Black voters who read the Black candidate’s signals of personal sacrifice did not make meaningful distinctions between financial or physical sacrifices, suggesting that the costliness is seemingly uniform. Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, the realized commitment made evident by the perceived past sacrifices works in the candidate’s favor, leading him to be more positively evaluated relative to the control condition. This elucidates a reality that, for Black Democratic men politicians, personal sacrifice conveys a strong sense of their commitment, which heavily influences their affective

evaluations in positive ways. Despite falling just outside of conventional statistical significance ($p=.056$), there is a similar positive effect for the White politicians whose appeals reference their physical sacrifice for the Black community.

In short, community commitment signaling is an effective means of providing Black voters with the information they are looking for to determine high quality representatives. The expected result that the realized commitment communicated through the personal sacrifice signals leads to higher evaluations is validated in the results presented. While familial social connections do communicate a perceived accountability to the racial group, that does not translate into higher evaluations relative to the control, suggesting that the least costly signals are not enough to sway Black voters, even when the candidates are Black male Democrats. This is a relatively consistent finding for both the Black and White men politicians revealing a need to plumb the efficacy of these appeals further.

Alternate Explanations for the Effect of Community Commitment

Thus far, I have shown that Black voters do dissect the appeals made to them by politicians and glean them to see if a politician will meet their expectations of commitment. I then show that Black voters use that information to determine their affective evaluation such as the politician's trustworthiness or the respondent's willingness to support the candidate. Taken together, these findings offer compelling evidence that community commitment signaling operates as a mechanism that explains how and why Black voters make distinctions between politicians. Those politicians who can show their past actions involve sacrifice for the racial group are more likely to be seen as committed and thus to receive positive evaluations. These findings are not confined to the descriptive representation paradigm, but show that certain community commitment signals also work for White politicians as well.¹⁰

¹⁰ Please see the appendix for the difference in difference analysis to support the claim that the relative effects of community commitment signaling are not informed by the race of the politician.

What remains unclear, however, is whether there is other information conveyed in these appeals that may influence Black voters' evaluations of the candidate outside of their perceptions of their commitment. Table 7 details 4 models that investigate whether respondents glean other information that might be pertinent to their assessments. These models are informed by what scholarship tells us are important considerations that Black voters use to when evaluating politicians- ideology, linked fate, closeness to the Black community, the likelihood of promoting policies that will help the Black community.

	Candidate's Perceived Ideology (1=Very Liberal)		Candidate's Perceived Linked Fate (1= High Linked Fate)		Candidate's Perceived Closeness to the Black Community (1= Extremely Close)		Likelihood of Promoting Policies that Help the Black Community (1= Very Likely)	
	(A)		(B)		(C)		(D)	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Control	.59 [.56, .63]	.58 [.54, .61]	.48 [.43, .54]	.43 [.37, .48]	.51 [.47, .54]	.45 [.42, .49]	.61 [.58, .64]	.61 [.57, .64]
<u>Social Connection-</u> Familial	.55 [.52, .59]	.58 [.55, .62]	.52 [.46, .57]	.40 [.34, .45]	.52 [.49, .56]	.43 [.39, .46]	.63 [.60, .67]	.57 [.53, .60]
<u>Social Connection-</u> NAACP	.58 [.55, .62]	.58 [.55, .62]	.52 [.46, .57]	.41 [.36, .47]	.53 [.50, .57]	.46 [.43, .50]	.64 [.61, .68]	.59 [.55, .63]
<u>Personal Sacrifice-</u> Financial	.57 [.53, .61]	.60 [.56, .63]	.50 [.45, .56]	.43 [.38, .48]	.57* [.54, .61]	.47 [.44, .51]	.63 [.59, .67]	.61 [.58, .65]
<u>Personal Sacrifice-</u> Physical	.60 [.57, .64]	.64* [.60, .67]	.54 [.49, .60]	.47 [.41, .52]	.58** [.55, .62]	.50 [.47, .54]	.69** [.65, .73]	.57 [.53, .60]
N	1040	1031	1040	1031	1040	1031	1040	1031

Table 7. Alternative Information Gleaned from Community Commitment Signals; *Note: All significance tests are two-tailed means tests. *= $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ and relative to the corresponding control in each column*

In both models A and B, community commitment signals have no meaningful effect on respondents' perceptions of the Black candidate's ideology or sense of linked fate, or that what happens to Black people has an effect on their lives. Respondents who read about the White candidate's physical sacrifice see him as more liberal, on average, than those in the control. The Black candidate is seen as closer to the Black community by those respondents who read about his personal sacrifices, both financial and physical sacrifices for the racial group relative to those respondents in the control ($p < .05$ and $p < .01$ respectively). This heightened perception of closeness might be seen as the justification for the consistent positive evaluations shown above for the Black politician. However, I posit, this finding is less an alternative explanation for why Black candidates who employ personal sacrifice signals are more likely to be viewed positively, and rather indicative of the candidate's comprehension and adherence to the expectations of Black voters, which is something only those who are close to the community would understand and appreciate.

Within the literature on descriptive representation, many scholars have written about the relationship between being represented by same race politicians and the likelihood of them introducing and voting on policies that better the Black community (Minta 2012; Hayes and Hibbing 2017). While existing work has been able to establish an important linkage between descriptive and substantive representation, it is hard to establish a causal relationship between the behavior of descriptive representatives is the result of them displaying certain behavior before they were voted in that led Black voters to select them, whether the desire to help the Black community is intrinsic, or whether they made a choice to behave this way once in office. The results from this experiment offer deeper insight by showing that the information Black voters glean by from community commitment signals offers a bridge between the descriptive and the substantive representational models. When the politician invokes his personal sacrifice for the sake of the racial group in a physical manner, there is an increase in the belief that he is likely, relative to their respective controls, to promote policies that will help the Black community.

This finding is particularly important because it shows that Black voters' desire for commitment is not simply for intangible benefits, but they also have legislative outcomes in mind when making these decisions. What these findings make clear is despite the reliance on social expectations and dynamics, Black voters consider the substantive benefits of certain politicians in their candidate selection calculus without any invocation of substantive positions. Moreover, community commitment signaling is a way that Black individuals are able to make that determination. This finding introduces an important question- is this outcome one that comes from the perception of commitment to prioritizing the issues of the racial group, or because of this perception of better substantive representation?

I argue that these two things should not be held in conflict with one another, but rather in concert. Indeed, the perception that a politician is going to promote these policies that benefit Black people is shown to be the direct byproduct of past actions that have shown a commitment to group prioritization. Thus, any conclusion being drawn about what a politician will do in the future comes based on the kind of signal they employ. In other words, the perception that a politician who is, based on the signal they employ, believed to be more likely to promote policies that benefit that Black community is not a competing explanation against my argument that Black voters' assessments of one's realized or potential commitment, but rather a complementary one.

Discussion

Within the study of democratic representation there has been little exploration into the salient factors, outside of partisanship and race, that influence the way that individuals, particularly those communities with histories of political exclusion, choose their descriptive representatives. Understanding the criterion citizens use to include or exclude certain representatives informs whether and how democratic institutions operate fairly. Overall, the takeaway from the findings presented here is that community commitment matters for how Black voters assess and select representatives. Much of the work within descriptive representation has led both scholars and pundits to believe that Black voters' preference for in-group representation is paramount to other factors that may play a part, and thus, if a

politician is Black, Black people will support them. The analyses discussed in this work demonstrate that the role of race in Black representation, descriptive or otherwise, is far more nuanced insofar that Black individuals' expectations far exceed a desire for a politician to share a physical characteristic.

This work is not a complete departure from the descriptive representation research. In fact, extends what we know about Black voters' in-group preference by revealing that while Black politicians are given the benefit of the doubt in terms of their perceived commitment, the influence of community commitment signals is no greater for Black politicians than it is for White ones. Put another way, the effect of community commitment signaling does not inherently benefit Black politicians over White ones. This is important because it suggests that Black politicians cannot simply come to the Black electorate without evidence of their commitment and expect Black voters to offer them strong support. Moreover, White politicians can garner Black support by providing proving themselves through costly past actions. This finding is of particular importance within the realm of political science as little is known about Black voters' perceptions of and preference for White politicians despite the majority of the politicians for which Black voters select being White.

The results presented in this paper provide convincing evidence of the preference for community commitment as a mechanism of Black voter candidate preference, especially when it is shown through costly actions of personal sacrifice. Within economic signaling theory, there is a distinction that is made between "cheap talk" and "costliness," and I contend that personal sacrifice speaks to the latter category, while the signals of a social connection to one's family or an organization like the NAACP, speaks to the former category. This distinction might explain the lack of successful in when politicians referenced their social connections. It is possible that in situations where sacrifices cannot be referenced, Black voters want a much stronger display of connection and accountability than the one shown in this study's experimental design.

In short, the results of this work show that, above all, Black voters want a sure thing. They want to know that when a politician makes a claim, they will follow through and not deviate from the

expectations of the group in order to garner success for themselves. Across a variety of measures, I illustrated the sophisticated nature with which Black voters not only glean information from the appeals of politicians, but also use that information to determine a number of things about those politicians including whether they are worthy of support.

Conclusion

In this study, I establish community commitment as an often-overlooked mechanism that explains how and why Black voter candidate preferability and selection operates. To do this, I use a large-scale experimental test that controls for the commonly studied attributes in the literature- candidate race, partisan affiliation, and gender. In this experiment, I show that Black voters do indeed perceive a politician's commitment to the Black community based on the kind of appeals they employ and use that information to determine their affective evaluations.

Limitations

However, community commitment, like other political factors, is not the only consideration Black voters make. As in any electoral context, there are a myriad of factors that play a part in the decision-making process of voters that cannot be replicated experimentally. An example of this is found in Bernie Sanders's invocation of his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during his 2016 and 2020 presidential bids. According to the work presented here, that should have been effective enough to garner him strong Black support, yet many older Black individuals doubted the validity of his claims. Even after evidence was found of his involvement, when asked about it, famed civil rights icon John Lewis said, "I never saw him...I never met him,"¹¹ which, I posit, undermined the efficacy of the community commitment signal that Bernie Sanders invoked. John Lewis, a Black politician whose

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/13/john-lewis-congressional-black-caucus-bernie-sanders-civil-rights-movement>

sacrifices for the group and the associated commitment to the Black community is the stuff of legend was able to diffuse what should have been a very effective signal from Sanders with his own countersignal. It is not necessarily that Sanders's message of sacrifice to the racial group did not matter, but rather that the skepticism of a Black politician whose commitment was unwavering and well known made it less effective. Signals of community commitment, like other salient political considerations, are not happening in a vacuum and can, in certain circumstances have their efficacy reduced.

Generalizability

Black Americans are not the only marginalized group about whom conventional wisdom has been misconstrued. Similar to the conjecture surrounding Black voters' candidate selection, identity groups, such as LGBTQ+ and Latinx people have been stereotyped with reference to how they choose their candidates. This was made most apparent in the 2020 presidential Democratic Primary where Pete Buttigieg and Julian Castro were both expected to win over co-identity voters expected, as the first out gay man and first Latinx man running for the office, respectively. However, neither of them garnered the expected voting blocs providing further evidence of the need to better understand how politically marginalized groups make their candidate selection choices. Taken together, the misunderstandings surrounding the role of identity in the candidate selection process of marginalized groups is not confined to the Black community.

This article expands understandings of representation because the mechanism of community commitment does not solely rely on the physical characteristics of the representatives or even similar lived experiences as necessary and sufficient tenets of their ability to represent the interests of a set of constituents. It delves deeper into the group's norms and expectations to find the glue behind the group's consciousness and applies that to the representative/constituent paradigm. To be sure, sharing a similar identity as one's constituents may contribute to perceptions of one's ability, but, as shown here, it is not sufficient to fully meet the expectations of voters. Future research should not solely rely on the existing explanations for the success of descriptive representatives, but should continue to investigate the

descriptive representative/constituent relationship, and the histories therein, to understand how certain representatives in office got there and who might be permitted access in the future.

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