Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OBAMA AND THE POST-RACIAL FALLACY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[6] www.delawareonline.com/story/opinion/2016/02/23/ben-carson-and-cornel-west-actually-agree-obamas-not-Black-enough/80829618/
[7] www.salon.com/2007/01/22/obama_161/
[8] www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467

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

THE ROLE OF PARTISANSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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