



RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Glass half full: cautious optimism and the future of Black women political elites in America”

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Abstract

In this essay, we place Black women’s electoral challenges and opportunities in context. We situate this year of “Black Women Candidates” as an anomaly, but one that has been a long in the making. We also point to the appeal of Black women lawmakers among voters to mirror Alberder Gillespie’s claims in this epigraph. We note that Black women have long been the backbone of the Democratic Party and are willing to use their clout for their own political means. Furthermore, given the unique ways that Black women represent their constituents, an influx of Black women into governing bodies may have a substantial, lasting impact on policy-making. We conclude with insights from our own research and that of other scholars on Black women to demonstrate future avenues of scholarly research.

Keywords: Black women; candidates; elected officials; 2020 Election

We bring a different perspective to politics as Black women. We have the ability and the tendency to look out for everyone. We are connected with people who are closest to the pain in ways that other politicians probably are not—Alberder Gillespie.

Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) has made history by being on the 2020 Democratic presidential ticket. Harris, a multi-ethnic Black woman and the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, is a descriptive representative of many historically marginalized communities that called on the government to be more inclusive. The first Black woman to be nominated as the vice-presidential candidate by a major political party, Kamala Harris is charting new ground. Yet, she is not alone. Harris is running in an election cycle where she joins other Black women who are seeking office at an unprecedented rate. In fact, this is the year of the Black woman candidate. The Center for American Women and Politics reports that at least 130 Black women

are running for Congress in 2020 compared to 87 Black women who ran in 2018 and the 52 who ran in 2016 (CAWP, 2020). This number includes the universe of Black women who filed as candidates but do not include the non-voting offices in the U.S. House (CAWP, 2020). Black women are running as both Democrats and Republicans, although Democrats vastly outnumber their GOP sisters. Black women candidates are running at unprecedented levels. Indeed, this is the largest number of Black women candidates in the nation's history. To be clear, there have been several notable Black women politicians in the past and a good number of whom could have held prestigious office if they were not stymied by structural and institutional racism and sexism.

This new level of engagement with politics along with Harris' increased visibility as she moves from Senator to Vice Presidential nominee, requires us to think about the motivations and challenges faced by Black women seeking political office. Studies of women candidates have debated ambition (Lawless and Fox, 2012), structural constraints (Brown and Dowe, 2020), as well as the effect of sexism on their prospects for electoral success (Frasure-Yokley, 2018; Cassese and Holman, 2019; Filindra *et al.*, 2020). Studies on Black candidates, including Obama, have discussed how the race of the candidate influences their electoral chances (Siegelman *et al.*, 1995), but also their typification as liberal and focused on race may have electoral implications as well (Karl and Ryan, 2016). Furthermore, studies have examined how women of color candidates' messaging and strategies can influence their ability to establish winning coalitions within the electorate (Barreto, 2007). Others have also shown the effects of "racial gerrymandering" (Canon, 1999) and the difficulties associated with running outside of majority-minority districts (Lublin *et al.*, 2020). However, Black women inhabit an intersectional space: their access to nominations, their candidacies, their ability to raise money, and their chances with the electorate are influenced not only by their race but also their gender (Dowe, 2020). In that sense, Black women are often seen as doubly marginalized in society as well as in politics (King, 1988; Beal, 2008). This study highlights these unique challenges and identifies avenues for future research in this domain.

We situate this year of "Black Women Candidates" has been long in the making. Indeed, 2020 is the culmination of Black women's historic contributions across elections. Yet, many more Black women are running in 2020 because of the unique threat that Trump is posing to minority communities. Black women have long been the backbone of the Democratic Party and are now willing to use their clout for their own political ends (Brown and Dowe, 2020). However, it is likely that this pattern of political engagement may generate a positive feedback effect, motivating more Black and other minority women to run in future elections. Furthermore, as Alberder Gillespie suggests in the epigraph, given the unique ways that Black women represent their constituents, an influx of Black women into governing bodies may have substantial, lasting impact on policy-making (Brown, 2014; Brown and Gershon, 2016).

In spite of the barriers that Black women face to securing electoral victories there are good reasons to believe that they are the future of politics. However, our optimism is tempered by ongoing political, economic, and social inequities that marginalize Black women both as citizens and political elites. We foreground two points of analysis in this essay: what we know about Black women by presenting both the good and bad news; and what scholars have yet to examine but should as we deepen our

understanding of Black women political elites. We conclude with insights from our own research and that of other scholars on Black women to demonstrate future avenues of scholarly research.

1. Black women campaigning for office

1.1 The bad news

The choice to run for office is complex for women. Women—often breadwinners and the primary caregivers of loved ones—face unique challenges in seeking higher office. They are also less likely to be recruited to run for office and face significant challenges when fundraising (Crowder-Meyer, 2020; Shames *et al.*, 2020). As a result of these and other challenges, some women may decline to run (Shames, 2015). Scholars have also found that the decision to run for office among women of color and Black women, in particular, may be distinct from white women (e.g. Holman and Schneider, 2018; Silva and Skulley, 2019). For example, women of color face greater challenges in fundraising, compared with white women (see Sanbonmatsu, 2015). Additionally, women of color are successful when they run but are often absent from races in majority white districts (Shah *et al.*, 2019).

Black women candidates routinely document their dissatisfaction with the political process. They are less likely to be recruited by their political parties and are discouraged from running for office (Brown and Dowe, 2020). When Black women decide to run, they face an uphill battle, compared with white women and men, in securing funds and are thus viewed as less electable than their male and white counterparts (Sanbonmatsu, 2015). Black women interested in running for office perceive that political parties are perceived as a hindrance rather than a help (Sanbonmatsu, 2015; Brown and Dowe, 2020; Dowe, 2020). Black women candidates often consider the Democratic Party, in particular, as fostering the persistent marginalization of their candidacies (Brown and Lemi, *forthcoming*). Black women feel neglected and ignored within transactional party politics that values Black women's votes but not their leadership (Gillespie and Brown, 2019). Furthermore, Black women candidates consistently state that they face distinctly racialized and gendered challenges while on the campaign trail. They are often told to straighten their hair, tone down racial identifiers or to wear more feminine attire to appeal to more voters (Brown, 2014; Brown and Lemi, *forthcoming*). Additionally, racial and gender phenotypes of Black women candidates are assessed in some voters' evaluations of this group in ways that disadvantage darker skin and women without straight hair (Lemi and Brown, 2019). In sum, Black women do not lack political ambition. Structural barriers, instead, are the cause of their undersized role in some electoral districts.

1.2 The good news

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, Black women have exceeded Black male elected officials and are the fastest growing demographic among women political elites (Hardy-Fanta *et al.*, 2016). This may be due in large part to Black women's political ambition. Dowe (2020) finds that this group is more ambitious than white

women likely because of Black women's political socialization, networks, and their raced-gendered identity. This high level of ambition may have prompted Black women to seek elected office outside of majority-minority districts (Perry, 2018), whereas a vast majority of Black elected officials represent districts with large Black populations (Scola, 2006; Troustine and Valdin, 2008).

As candidates, Black women engage in distinct messaging which may resonate with voters in 2020 and beyond, particularly voters who share one or more of their identities. For decades, scholars have identified substantive differences in the campaign-style and experiences of women and minorities running for office, compared with their white male peers. With notable exceptions, women have been found to engage in more frequent gendered discussion as well as mentions of particular issue areas often associated with women (e.g., Thomas, 1994; Dodson *et al.*, 1995; Kahn, 1996; Swers, 1998; Carroll, 2001; Thomas and Welch, 2001; Dolan and Kropf, 2004; Fridkin and Woodall, 2005). Furthermore, scholars often note that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to emphasize particular identities, issues, and experiences when running for and holding elective office. We and other scholars have often found that minorities emphasize their racial and ethnic identities and issues associated with race and ethnicity (McIlwain and Caliendo, 2002; Gulati, 2004; Gershon, 2008; Brown and Gershon, 2016). Given that many minority candidates run in minority-majority districts, the choice to play up particular identities and messaging is likely also a signal to potential voters about shared experiences and ability to represent constituents' interests (Gershon, 2008; Brown and Gershon, 2019).

Although there is less literature in political science on the experiences of women of color and Black women specifically (relative to the attention paid to gender generally—often focusing on white women), scholars have found distinct ways that these women campaign for office. The study of gender and politics has largely been that of white women (Junn, 2017) which has unfortunately left the political experiences and behavior of Black women undertheorized. For example, in our previous work (e.g., Brown and Gershon, 2016, 2019), we have found women of color highlight their multiple identities, as well as that of their descriptive constituencies in their campaign messaging more frequently than their peers. There is a great diversity among Black women in the ways they bring their identity to bear in this type of campaign messaging. In our research on the 2018 midterm election (Brown and Gershon, 2019), we found that many Black women express how their multiple identities inform their policy positions, experiences and plans in unique ways. For example, Congresswoman Alma Adams (D-NC) 2018 website biography opened with a descriptor of how her identity informs her politics. She expressed “education and women’s rights aren’t political issues, they are personal issues that have shaped how she is today and how she represents the people she serves.” The succeeding paragraph in Congresswoman Adams’ biography noted that she grew up in a single-parent household where she witnessed her mother’s sacrifices that ultimately instilled in her a strong work ethic and love for education. The theme of family and identity was also found in Congresswoman Karen Bass’s (D-CA) biography webpage, in which she stated that “[she] became interested in community activism as a child watching the Civil Rights Movement with her father. It was at this time that she made a lifetime commitment to effecting social change in her community ...” One

of the few Black Republican women running for Congress in 2018, Aja Smith proudly presented her family's military service as being the foundation for her belief system. On her biography webpage, she shared "both of Aja's Grandparents served in the U.S. Military. Her Grandfather was a veteran of WWII, Korea, and Vietnam. Her great uncle was a Tuskegee Airman Pilot." Demonstrating her connections to Black servicemen and women signals to two sets of potential voters. First, as a Republican, Aja Smith is conveying to Black communities that through her military lineage, she is part of the glorified history of Blacks in this country. Likewise, as a retired member of the armed forces, Aja Smith also demonstrated that not only has her family's military values influenced her career choices but it has also impacted her political orientation. This is a signal to Republican voters in her would-be CA district that being Black does not automatically link her to liberal or Democratic policy positions. These identity-centered examples demonstrate that Black women candidates are thinking broadly about the role of identity in their political lives and in some cases connecting them to specific political issues, preferences and plans.¹

In addition to our expectations about candidate messaging and strategy in 2020, we anticipate that the year of the Black women candidates may shape voter behavior—particularly among Black voters. Research has found that shared identity often shapes voter attitudes among racial and ethnic minorities, including Black voters (see Goodyear-Grant and Tolley, 2019 for a discussion of this literature). Philpot and Walton (2007) demonstrate that Black women are often the strongest supporters of Black women candidates. Indeed, this support is partisan as the majority of Blacks are Democratic voters (White and Laird, 2020) and there is strong Democratic support among Black women voters (Gillespie and Brown, 2019).

Black voters' political engagement in the election may also be impacted. For example, scholars have often found increased engagement in politics among women and minority voters when a candidate sharing one or more of their identities is running for office (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Burns *et al.*, 2001). Thus, we anticipate that the presence of Black women on the ballot—particularly with the announcement of Harris's candidacy—will increase political engagement among Black voters. New research suggests that voters display a positive orientation towards intersectional in-group candidates (Gershon *et al.*, 2019; Bejarano *et al.*, 2020). Coupled with the increased attention that Black women political elites pay to the specific issues that impact marginalized communities, these warm feelings toward Black women candidates may increase support for this popular within these communities.

1.3 Implications of 2020 for Black women candidates

Gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams' 2018 race in GA provides a recent example of the power of Black women candidates to mobilize Black voters (Frey, 2019; Scott *et al.*, 2020). Yet, we must also temper our expectations in this regard somewhat, given the attempts at voter suppression that Abrams and others have cited, as well as the impact the COVID-19 pandemic may have on turnout in 2020 (Wines, 2020). We also expect that the year of the Black woman candidate may shape candidate emergence, in the long run, encouraging more Black women to run for office and shaping the party's recruitment strategies.

2. The year of the Black woman elected official? Implications for representation

As we noted, we are not certain that this historic campaign season will result in a “Year of the Black Woman Elected Official.” However, if 2020 sees a sizable growth in Black women in office, implications for policymaking may be significant. Yet, as in our discussion above, there is also “the bad news” regarding the systemic challenges Black women face in representing their constituents while in office. Below, we detail the research regarding Black women’s impact in policy-making as well as the barriers they face.

2.1 *The good news*

Scholars have found Black women represent their constituents in distinct and meaningful ways. For example, Black women’s symbolic representation through communication on their websites and floor debates often includes a greater discussion of the needs of marginalized communities, including, but not limited to those sharing one or more of their identities (Brown and Gershon, 2016, 2017). Our own intersectional research (Brown and Gershon, 2017) on the 2012 floor debate over the reauthorization of Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) demonstrates that Black Congresswomen provided a dynamic analysis of the implications of the bill. Indeed, Maxine Waters (D-CA) framed expansions to VAWA as necessary to ensure that vulnerable groups who had been inadequately protected in the previous version of the bills would see their needs reflected in the 2015 reauthorization. Waters’ advocated for increased protections for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender victims of domestic violence who are often turned away from traditional shelters. She also asked her colleagues to include provisions for Native American women who are disproportionately on the receiving end of intimate partner violence. Native women experience domestic violence at rates nearly three and half times that of the national average. And lastly, Representative Waters called on her colleagues to limit barriers that immigrant victims face when trying to report crimes out of fear that they will be denied citizenship. She argued to maintain confidential protections and access to U-Visas for immigrant survivors of domestic violence. While Maxine Waters did not explicitly speak about protecting Black women from domestic violence, she was one of the few Members of Congress who made explicit connections to how policies should take into account the specific needs of marginalized groups. The other Members of Congress to take this same approach were Democratic Congresswomen of color such as Representative Nydia Velasquez (D-NY) and Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA). This stood in stark contrast to Republican (primarily white) Congresswomen who sought to paint women as a monolith and favored a universal approach to anti-violence protections.

This scholarship mirrors earlier work that demonstrates how Black women state legislators approach policy creation with an identity-based lens. For instance, Brown (2014) finds that Black women lawmakers were the only group that challenged Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) legislation for being exclusive and having the unintended consequence of placing minority women contractors at a disadvantage.

Minority women business owners were forced to choose between applying for state contracts to do business as *either* a woman or a minority. Furthermore, these quotes for state contracts were often opaque and minority women business owners had little understanding if the numbers were in their favor to apply as a woman or minority. As a result, they were often left out of state contracts and unable to do business through the Minority Business Enterprise Program. It was Black woman state legislators who raised this issue with their colleagues and pointed out the shortsightedness of White women and ethno-racial minority male legislators who established this program. Without the voices of Black women legislators, it is doubtful that Maryland's MBE would have addressed this oversight.

A more recent example of the work that Black women lawmakers are championing is the right to wear one's natural textured hair in culturally appropriate ways. The CROWN Act is a law that prohibits race-based hair discrimination. Create a **R**espectful and **O**pen **W**orld for Natural Hair seeks to protect employment and educational opportunities for wearers of protective styles such as braids, locs, twists and those with Afro-textured hair. In a forthcoming book project, Brown and Lemi establish that Black women lawmakers are at the forefront of pushing this legislation and that hair discrimination is of particular concern to Black women and girls. Indeed, CA State Senator Holly J Mitchell introduced the CROWN Act. Black women state legislators in NY and NJ quickly followed Mitchell's lead and introduced the legislation in their respective states. First signed into law in CA, the CROWN Act is now law in seven states and a handful of local municipalities.² Two Black men Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Cedric Robinson (D-LA) introduced the CROWN Act to Congress in 2019 with the overwhelming support of Black women state and local lawmakers as well as citizens.

Our individual and collective research—like that of other scholars cited here—demonstrates that Black women bring a distinct voice to the legislative process. They have a unique policy perspective that is needed to represent groups that had been previously ignored. Electing Black women, therefore, has policy consequences for the representation of groups and issues that have been largely overlooked by legislators of other identity groups. The responses to these uncrystallized issues illustrate the importance of having diverse bodies in legislative settings (Mansbridge, 1999). To be clear, it is not simply having Black women elected to office to bring about these policy shifts, but rather it is having a number of Black women with varying experiences in the policy-making process who are recommending political solutions to a set of problems that had previously been made without them in mind (Brown, 2014). Thus, the policy implications of the 2020 election may be significant for the representation of Black women as well as many other historically marginalized groups in America.

2.2 *The bad news*

We hesitate in our optimism, given the systemic obstacles Black women face while governing. This is truly a historic election year. Yet even if all of the Black women running in 2020 are elected to office, they may be unable to see their legislative agenda come to fruition. Legislative bodies are institutions that structure racial and gender hierarchies that persistently silence, exclude and challenges the authority of

women of color (Hawkesworth, 2003). Political institutions remain overwhelming populated and controlled by individuals from dominant groups (Rosenthal, 2002) which means that racism and gender biases are incorporated into the structure of the legislature because of the social practices of the legislators themselves (Johnson, 1997). As such, Black women elected officials may not realize the impact they are capable of making in institutions designed to exclude and marginalize them. Even when Black women legislators obtain powerful positions and seniority within the institution, there are reports feeling that they are not equal members of the governing body (Smooth, 2001). Without structural changes in our governing bodies, Black women and legislators from other historically marginalized backgrounds may be unable to advance the policy interests of the groups that they represent.

While 2020 is the year of the Black woman candidate, the outcome of electoral victories in November may be stymied by discriminatory practices within legislatures (Hedge *et al.*, 1996), institutional unresponsiveness (Hall, 1996), and biases of their colleagues (Githens and Prestage, 1977). The year of the Black women candidate will not only be shaped by the extraordinary accomplishments of this group, but also by the structure of the institutions and that they will enter in January 2021 and the actions of their colleagues.

3. Where do we go from here? Expanding research on Black women in the future

Black women are quintessential to American democracy. As political elites and voters, Black women push America to live up to democratic principles. Yet Black women repeatedly note that they are undervalued and unappreciated in the political process (Gillespie and Brown, 2019; Brown and Dowe, 2020). They are also undertheorized subjects in political science research (Alexander-Floyd, 2018). Thus, we advocate for Black women in politics on two fronts: within academia and in electoral politics. We contend that both scholars and the American political structure should pay more attention to Black women.

The discipline of political science should diversify our studies of political elites and voters in order to speak to the contemporary political environment. We echo the commendation made by the American Political Science Association's Presidential Task Force "Political Science in the 21st Century Report" that is nearly a decade old. The Pinderhughes administration (2007–08) recommended that political science research take gender and ethno-racial diversity seriously. The authors of the report urged political scientists to recognize the diversifying demographics of our country and to produce scholarship that reflects the rapidly changing national and global contexts in which we write. Political science has been slow to heed this advice (Sinclair-Chapman, 2015). As such, the discipline and the larger American political class was unprepared to assess President Trump's victory in 2016. Many scholars were surprised to learn that a majority of white women supported Trump and that ethno-race is the driving factor in the gender gap (Junn, 2017; Frasure-Yokley, 2018). However, intersectional scholars have long implored the discipline to be more fully attuned to intra-group diversity (Simien, 2006; Frasure and Williams, 2009; Greer, 2013; Brown, 2014). We anticipate that this election cycle and those in the immediate

future will be marked by increased attention to the intra-group diversity among ethno-racial minority groups and women.

As scholars who study women and politics, we urge our field to consider how our scholarship (and as a byproduct, our assumptions about the role of gender identity in politics) has historically centered on the experiences of some (primarily white) women over others. This oversight has limited our collective knowledge and our ability to speak to the trends we see unfolding in politics this year. There is an increased need for intersectional approaches and to expand our focus on the specific and unique experiences of differently situated women. For instance, how are Black queer urban women fairing in today's political climate? In what ways are their political experiences different or similar to that immigrant or multi-ethnic Black women? Do they have divergent policy preferences or is their race/gender an outsized predictor of their political behavior? Future scholarship should take a deeper dive into intra-group differences and similarities to learn more about what politically animates undertheorized groups' engagement in American politics. Further, scholarship focusing on Black women without comparison to whites, Black men or other women must also expand. Comparisons of Black Americans to other groups often ignore or conflate the socio-historical contexts that gave rise to unique group formation (Carter, 2019). As Masuoka and Junn (2013) forcefully argue, we must ban the dummy variable. It is imperative that group development and maintenance is addressed in work that seeks to assess or compare historically marginalized groups (see Hardy-Fanta *et al.*, 2016 as an excellent example of how to do this kind of research).

In a similar fashion, Biden's declaration that he would name a woman as a running mate drew considerable discussion in the media, among citizens, and scholars about the continued salience of descriptive representation (Kalid, 2020). The subsequent successful lobby by Black women activists and political elites that she should be a Black woman revealed that an intersectional approach is necessary for understanding the political needs of the American electorate (King, 2020). Indeed, Harris' selection was the byproduct of a decades long Black women's advocacy, struggle with the Democrat Party, and progressive activism. Black women are a political force, an enthusiastic and consistent voting bloc for Democratic ideals (Gillespie and Brown, 2019). Black women political operatives successfully championed several potential Black women candidates for Biden's pick of vice president and rallied to support Kamala Harris (Burdryk, 2020). The political climate is ripe for Black women candidates. However, Black women have always been ready for high profile political positions. Shirley Chisholm (D-NY), Barbara Jordan (D-TX) or Patricia Harris would have made remarkable candidates for vice president; however, the country was unwilling and unready to see a Black woman in this position prior to 2020.

Even with the progress of naming a Black woman to the ticket, there remain vestiges of the country's uneasiness with Black women political elites. Kamala Harris has been subject to racist and sexist attacks. Misogynoir, hatred of Black women and girls (Bailey and Trudy, 2018), is evident in this election cycle. Indeed, President Donald Trump has used racist and sexist attacks against Harris, he questioned whether she was eligible to serve as vice president given her parent's immigrant background (Keith, 2020) as well as calling her "nasty" and "horrible," (Solendar, 2020) words that he often uses to criticize women opponents (Rogers, 2020). Likewise,

Republican Mayor Barry Presgraves of Luray, VA, called Kamala Harris “Aunt Jemima” in August 2020, showcasing that stereotypic epithets against Black women are still common place. And another Virginian, Strasburg Council Member John Massoud posted a meme on social media that referred to Harris as a hoe (Vargas, 2020). These types of insults further reify Blacks women’s social and political subjugation as bodies out place in American politics.

This historic election which may put the first multi-racial Black woman in the White House demonstrates that we need to become broader and more wide-ranging in our research in the fields of racial and ethnic politics as well as gender and politics in the American context. While Kamala Harris’ selection as the Democratic nominee would not have been possible without the countless other Black women who pushed for the Democratic party to be more inclusive, this moment would be remiss if the scholarship of Black women’s political participation and candidacies were not coupled with this historic moment. Indeed, this moment is not only for Harris but for Black women’s future in American politics, whose political labor is often invisible both inside and outside of the academy (Jordan-Zachery, 2013).

We close as we begin. The words by Alberder Gillespie are a powerful reminder of why the work of Black women political elites is so important. It is imperative that scholars and practitioners alike recognize the value that Black women bring to deliberative democracy, particularly in today’s political climate—one marked by COVID-19, Black Lives Matter activism, and a global economic slowdown. Black women characterize themselves as running to represent the interests of those that are often in the most pain, those that they have a deep connection to, and communities that are ignored. Black women candidates are running at outsized rates at time that highlighted their political activism, showcased persistent racial and gender disparities and the inattention of some political elites to their issues. As such, Black women have taken it upon themselves in 2020 to run for elected office. Their time is now, they are the future.

Notes

- 1 All website biographies cited were downloaded from the candidates’ 2018 campaign websites and archived in November 2018. Please contact the authors for more information about the data collection.
- 2 <https://www.thecrownact.com/about>.

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